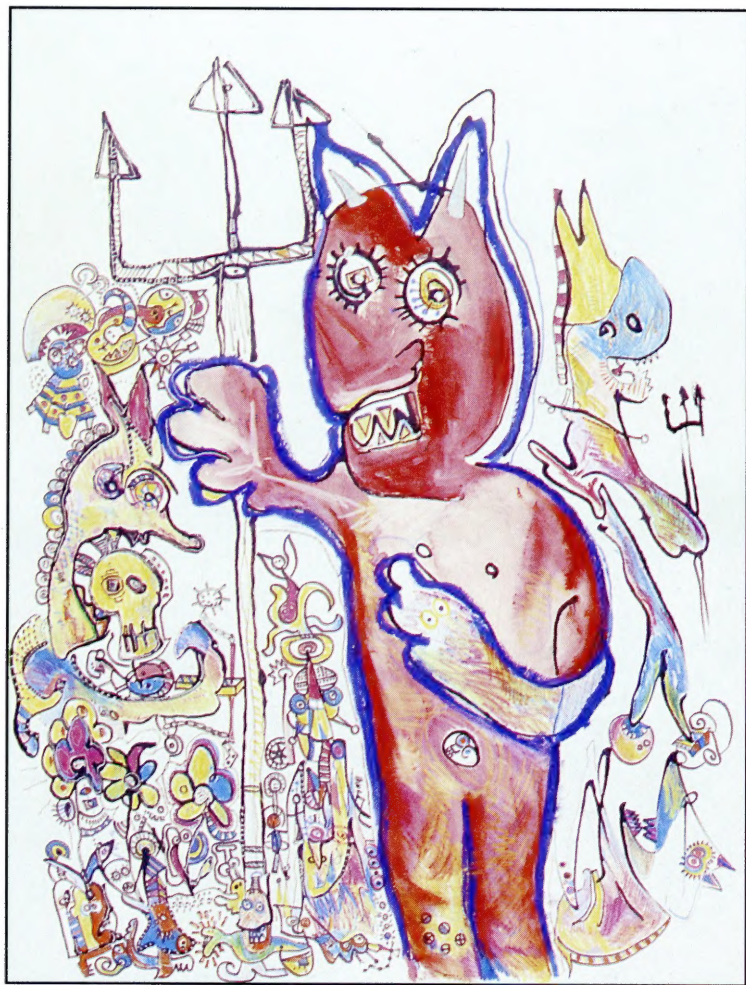


THE AUBURN CIRCLE



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THE AUBURN CIRCLE

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The Auburn Circle, financed by advertising and student activity fees, serves as a forum for the writers and artists within the university community. It aims to appeal to a diverse audience by providing a variety of short stories, poetry, art, and photography. *The Auburn Circle* is published three times a year - fall, winter, and spring - with an average distribution of 4,000 copies. The views expressed throughout the issue are those of the authors, not necessarily those of the Auburn University Board of Student Communications, those companies advertising in *The Auburn Circle*, the editors and staff, Auburn University, Auburn's administration and Board of Trustees, or a salamander named Eugene.

SUBMISSIONS

The Auburn Circle accepts works from students, staff and alumni of Auburn University. Prose, poetry, essays and articles should be typed or legibly hand-written. *The Auburn Circle* has access to IBM and Macintosh computers. All artwork submitted remains in *The Auburn Circle* offices and is photographed to reduce risk of damage. We accommodate artwork of any size and shape. Slide submissions are accepted. Collections of related works by artists or photographers are accepted for our Gallery section. All submissions become property of *The Auburn Circle* on a one-time printing basis, with reserved rights for possible reprinting of material at a later date.

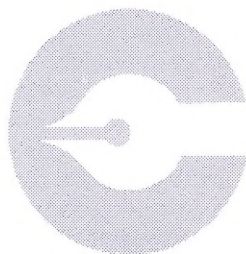
The Auburn Circle is located in the Publications Suite, basement of Foy Union, down the outside steps from the War Eagle cafeteria. For more information, call 844-4122, or write:

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THE EDITOR'S NOTE

As I prepared this issue, the last in my term as editor, I suddenly found myself embroiled in a debate about the nature of art — what is good art, what is bad art, and who should decide. This is nothing new — not to me, not to *The Auburn Circle*, and not to civilization in general — but I believe this question is too important to ignore. Because this debate centered on writing submissions to *The Auburn Circle*, and because writing is the type of art I feel most qualified to address, I'll direct my remarks that way. However, I believe that the philosophies used to judge and create good writing hold true for other areas of art as well.

The debate, carried out on the “letters to the editor” page of *The Auburn Plainsman* during the last half of winter quarter, began with an accusation that the staff and I used the magazine as a “vanity press,” a forum for our own work. When I responded that staff work was published only when we lacked quality outside submissions, I was branded pompous, elitist, and unfair by a third letter. The third writer wondered how I, or anyone, could have the temerity to say what was good art and what was bad art, what was worthy of publication and what was not.

At the back of the third letter hovered the specter that publishers, magazine editors, and critics have been battling since cavemen began to draw horses and bison on their walls — the question of judging artistic quality. I have no easy definition of my standards for good and bad art, which are roughly the same as any other magazine editor, book publisher, theater critic, art exhibition juror, or music critic in the Western world. However, at the risk of sounding harsh and elitist, I believe that it is possible and necessary to separate good art, and specifically good writing, from bad.

Ideas for poems and stories spring from a variety of sources — preoccupation, memory, emotion, and details the writer notices in everyday life. While the origins of writing may be mysterious, its practice and development is very much rooted in reality — often a grueling and mundane one. Most professional writers and artists recognize that some degree of intellectual distance is necessary to judge, edit, and develop one's own work; after the first flush of creation, which produces first drafts and initial brushstrokes, the artist begins to call on years of practice, craft, and technique to further develop the work, incorporating creative emotion and impulse but approaching the work-in-progress with a critical and craftsmanlike eye.

The poet Louise Bogan said, “Writing isn't something that comes to you on the wings of a dove. It's something you work hard at.” I have learned and discovered, through years of classes and workshops, that writing is not a matter of “mood” — it is a thorough, careful, and mature response to the writer's world, which requires a much deeper involvement than an occasional poem about kittens or depression.

Writing is an extremely difficult process which requires constant attention, devotion, and discipline. Weak, sentimental, or undeveloped ideals of writing — self-expression for its own sake and lavishing one's feelings on a grateful world — are not enough to carry a developing writer into a serious career. As Auburn professor Judy Troy, author of the short story collection "Mourning Doves," has said, "Writing is not about 'self-expression,' and it's not about 'therapy.'"

Most people who object to calling writing "good" or "bad" cannot separate the art from the artist, or separate the emotional atmosphere in which the work was created from the finished product itself. When an editor appraises a work and finds it good or bad, he or she is not criticizing the *writer* but the *writing*, not the personal impulses that led to the creation of the work but the degree of precision, and workmanship it contains.

Critics are interested primarily in craft and honesty, the degree to which the author's intent and emotion emerge on the printed page or the painted canvas. They cannot look into the artist's heart and call his or her emotional impulses defective; they can only see the finished product of those impulses, and that's all they are interested in seeing. If the art is successfully crafted, and the artist has been honest with himself throughout the creative process, his "feelings" will be skillfully and unsentimentally apparent in the work.

Professional artists have developed thick skins; they realize that their work will be criticized, and they take criticism constructively, as an opportunity rather than an insult. Artists who do not open their work to criticism, or resent constructive criticism they receive, are protecting their own "feelings" at the expense of their artistic development.

Everyone who submits (or does not submit) work to *The Auburn Circle* should be aware that when we accept or reject work, we are not passing judgement on the artist as a *person*, but on the degree of craft and attention we find in the work itself. Artists who object to our standards should realize that we are only the first in a long line of critics they will have to face if they are genuinely interested in pursuing their calling, and we are probably the most lenient.

The Auburn Circle has neither the budget nor the inclination to publish every submission we get, regardless of quality; that would be defeating the purpose of a literary magazine. Imagine picking up an unedited issue of *The New Yorker*, which receives hundreds of poetry submissions every month. Sorting through the sand to find the gold would be frustrating, to say the least. However, we are happy to discuss submissions with authors and provide suggestions; simply call the office at 844-4122.

I'm sure that there are many bones of contention in this article; I welcome feedback, through either *The Auburn Circle* or *The Auburn Plainsman*. The English Department offers several excellent creative writing workshops every year; if you are interested in learning the craft of writing, they're a wonderful place to start.

A.E.W.

CONTRIBUTORS

Charlotte Alane Majerick is a senior in horticulture, with an emphasis on landscape design. If she were to be an animal she'd be a three-toed sloth because they have a fungus between their toes that grows nowhere else on the planet.

Elaine Posanka, having recently completed her MA thesis in poetry, is now pursuing a PhD in Colonial American Literature at Auburn. She teaches freshman composition.

Jay Pongonis is a senior in English who divides his time between work, school, and sitting on his back porch imbibing nature. "Hey," he tells his friends, "I may not know what I'm going to do after I graduate, but at least I'll be practiced and ready for retirement."

Russ Connell is a senior majoring in English. He plans to attend graduate school, seek a master's degree in English Education, then attend law school.

David Strowd is somebody, but we don't know who.

Matt Gay, a senior in English who enjoys reruns of the original *Star Trek* and answers quite intuitively to the words "Dumb Swede," is still looking for his car keys.

Kevin Ray graduates this quarter, at last.

Kyes Stevens graduated in December with a degree in English and has returned for a degree in journalism. She lives alone in the middle of nowhere and loves it.

Libby Lynn's only goal in life is to listen to as much Elvis Costello and Elvis Presley as possible.

Mark S. Price is a professor in the art department. He has been concerned with language in composition lately, and many of his recent paintings incorporate text. His work will be hung in the faculty art show at the beginning of spring quarter.

Chad Parish is from Mobile, Alabama. He is a senior in English, with a concentration in creative writing and poetry. After graduating next fall, he plans to pursue a graduate degree and teach and write in the South.

Elisabeth Snell, who believes in combining the Old South with the New, eats her barbecue with Grand Baroque silver.

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FARMER FRANCIS AND FARMER BOB

Matt Gay

*Once Law was sitting on the bench
And Mercy knelt a-weeping.
"Clear out!" he cried, "disordered wench!
Nor come before me creeping.
Upon your knees if you appear,
'Tis plain you have no standing here."*

*Then Justice came. His honor cried:
"Your status? — devil seize you!"
"Amica curiae," she replied —
"Friend of the court, so please you."
"Begone!" he shouted — "there's the door —
I never saw your face before!"*

— Father Gassalasca Jape, S. J.

"Do you hear what I'm saying?" Mortis O'Toole swung his Bible wildly in the air. "Do you hear?!"

It was a warm day, that Sunday in April. Warm for that time of the year. Especially in the Midwest. You could usually still see a few hints of snow on the ground, but the remains of winter had long since melted.

The church was full. Sunlight streamed in through the windows, baking the men's shirt collars. A pungent smell of sweaty starch rose in the air. It mingled fiercely with the smell of freshly cut wood. The building was only nine months old. A good rain was all it took to bring out the over-powering smell of recently slaughtered pine. However, oblivious to the aroma, the congregation was all ears on their leader.

"A-Men!" they shouted.

Old Nathaniel Tucker in the front row added his echoing "A-Men!"

"And can you *read* what I'm saying?" Pastor O'Toole shouted back at them.

"A-Men!"

"Dear Jesus, YES!"

"I can read it!"

"I can see it for myself!"

They shouted and clapped. Old Nathaniel chorused along with them. Pastor O'Toole beamed with pride and wiped sweat from his brow. His head spun with the smell of his fragrant congregation. "Where can you read it?" he shouted, lifting his black-leather bound Bible higher in the air. "Where can you see it?"

"In the book!" somebody shouted back at him.

"A-Men!" came the cracked voice of Old Nathaniel.

"Where in the book?" Pastor O'Toole yelled.

"In the... beginning!" Old Nathaniel answered, without much assurance.

"A-Men! Hallelujah!"

"In the beginning of the book!" The veins in Old Nathaniel's neck pulsed at the constrictions of his shirt and tie.

"Where?" O'Toole screamed. And then there was a great pause. A swift sort of stillness had fallen over them, each waiting for another to answer. It was the type of stillness he hated, the embarrassing sort of silence that usually preceded a flatulating slip of the sphincter from Old Nathaniel. Pastor O'Toole didn't give him the chance.

"In Exodus!" he roared.

"YES!" The congregation was at its feet cheering.

"In Exodus!"

"In Exodus... in the beginning!" a familiar voice yelled back.

"And what does it say?" Pastor O'Toole called back to them.

The sound of frantically rustling pages overwhelmed him.

"What does it say?" he asked again. There was a pause. Then Old Nathaniel jumped up on his pew, twirled one finger triumphantly towards the heavens and screamed, "Eye for an eye!"

"Yes!" O'Toole cried, pointing to him.

"Tooth for a tooth!" Old Nathaniel yelled again, waving his hands in the air and falling backwards into the expecting arms of the farmers behind him. "YES!" O'Toole jumped off his platform and out from behind his podium. He panted as he strolled to the center of the church, his great mass heaving, his enormous belly straining the seams of his robe, his numerous chins flopping down to lay upon his chest. With his Bible in his hand, he motioned for silence. The men holding Old Nathaniel carefully laid him back on his pew.

"It says here in Exodus," he began slowly, when all of the hullabaloo had settled, "that *you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn,, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.*"

"Life for a life!" the ladies in the front shouted.

"Eye for an eye!" screamed the men in the back.

"Tooth for a tooth!" belched Old Nathaniel as he lay on his wooden pew.

"Hand for a hand!" bellowed the men who'd caught him.

"Foot for a foot!" screeched a little girl somewhere in the middle who just wanted to get into the swing of things.

"Burn for a burn!" O'Toole cried. "Stripe for a stripe!"

"Amen!"
"A-MEN!"
"A-MEN!"

Mortis O'Toole stepped out into the early Monday morning and offered the small village of Peer Gynt, Iowa, his warmest regards. Birds were chirping in the large maple trees surrounding his yard, and the sweet smell of clovers blew in with the breeze. It was his favorite time of year, that time between Christmas and Easter when everybody seemed to want to have him over for dinner.

Peer Gynt had been founded by Mortis' great grandfather, Eustis Posterous O'Toole, shortly before the Civil War. It had grown slowly in the sixty years since. It lay at the crossroads of about a dozen different farms. There, in the hub of rural development, were many signs of modern prosperity. A grocer's shop and a John Deere Farming Supply. A doctor's office and a jail. A blacksmith, a tailor, a carpenter, and, most importantly, the Town Hall which substituted as a church on Sundays. In the back was the small parsonage where Mortis lived.

Eustis O'Toole named the town on the basis of a small but extravagant rumor that Henrik Ibsen had once passed through his part of the country, and though *Peer Gynt* was not his favorite of the three Ibsen plays he'd read... believe it or not, *Doll House* and *Hedda Gabler* had already been used. They were small towns in the southern part of the state.

As the founding father's great grandson, the spiritual leader, and the political figure-head of the small rustic community, Mortis was, in many ways, the next best thing to Jesus those people could ever expect to see. On Sunday's he'd preach a "damn good sermon," rallying cheers and Amens from the congregation as he clenched his fists into meaty pulps and pounded them upon whatever there was to pound upon.

And the rest of the week he turned chapel into courtroom and settled disputes as their appointed judge with the power of the state behind him and the apparent backing of God Himself.

As he walked along the short path from home to work that Monday morning, not too early, he smiled to himself and to the people walking by, greeting them cheerfully.

"Morning, Pastor O'Toole," little Sarah Johnson called to him.

"Morning, Sarah," he said, lifting his hat. "How's your husband, today?"

"Still got the broke leg," she said.

He smiled sympathetically. "Our prayers to him," he told her. "Hello, there," he waved to the boy walking with Sarah. The child smiled back and waved.

Mortis smiled and then looked up as another one of his parishioners spied him.

"Howdy, Pastor O'Toole," Solomon, the blacksmith, called to him.

"Hello, Solomon. Lovely day, isn't it?"

"Just glad it ain't raining, Judge," the charred man answered before disappearing into the carpenter's shop.

Mortis had just about reached the door to the Hall when a frantic voice called out to him.

"Judge O'Toole! Judge!"

He stopped and looked around. Rachel Smith was racing towards him, dragging her boy, Saul, behind her. Saul was young and dusty and obviously not happy about the turn of events his life had suddenly taken. He was fighting every step of the way, trying to release himself from his mother's grasp.

"What can I do for you, Rachel?" Mortis asked calmly.

"It's Saul," she exclaimed, out of breath. "I told him if he did it again I'd take him down to talk to you."

"I see," Mortis said slowly, obviously not seeing.

"So here we are," she said and pushed Saul in front of her. The boy stared at his own feet.

"Well, Saul," Mortis said, chuckling, "here you are."

The boy didn't look up.

"Walk with me, Saul," Mortis said, turning away and walking slowly. For a second or two the boy didn't move, but a quick hiss from his mother prompted him to follow. After they were well out of her hearing range, Mortis turned around and squatted down on his immense haunches, looking up at the boy following him. "What is it, Saul?" he asked.

"Nothin'," the boy mumbled. Mortis nodded. "Probably... but tell me anyway. I'm afraid she isn't going to leave until you do." He paused, waiting for some response. Saul, looking like he might speak, glanced at him. "Go ahead," Mortis prodded.

"I've been fighting at school," Saul said finally.

"Why?"

"They've been teasing me." Mortis nodded.

"I know how it is. Tell me... do you win?" Saul looked shocked.

"Win?" he asked. "My fights?"

Mortis nodded. "Sure. Most of 'em."

"They hurt your feelings, so you hurt their bodies. Do you think that's right?"

Saul lowered his head. "No," he mumbled.

"Saul, to hit first is a sin. But to hit back is the law."

Saul looked up in surprise. "It is?"

"Sure. The Bible tells us that if somebody strikes you, you have the right to hit back. Hit for a hit, Saul. Nothing more."

"The Bible says that about me?" Saul asked, amazed.

"Absolutely."

"So I can hit back," Saul said.

"Of course." Just to be sure, he asked again. "The Bible tells me I can hit back?"

"You have my word on it."

"So all I've gotta do is get them to hit me first," the boy said to himself.

Mortis chuckled. "Something like that," he said.

Saul nodded, and Mortis stood up. "Thanks Judge O'Toole," he said. He turned and ran back to his mother who sent him off to school and spent a lengthy half an hour afterwards thanking Mortis for his time, promising not to take up any more of it. After she had left, he turned and entered the Hall.

It was a slow day at first. A judge's job in a pre-Depression, rural Iowan community was not a hectic one. Mortis allowed himself plenty of time to read and sleep. And, of course, lunch was always a welcome diversion. That Monday, as he was slurping down a vast array of meat and cheese sandwiches, cakes and pastries and the obligatory apple, in the middle of his favorite kind of solitude (the kind that accompanied food) his courtroom exploded on him.

First came Francis Bacon, a tall, lanky man in his mid-forties. Gray hair dressed his temples, and sun-burnt gristle seemed to taint his smooth arms. But the most interesting features about him were the two giants carrying him through the door: Isaac and Eli Toberson. Francis was cussing a storm up and having a terrible time keeping his feet on the ground. Isaac and Eli, both known county-through for their wrestling abilities, were gripping his arms in a cast-iron hold.

"Put me down!" he screeched at two men ignoring him.

Close at the heels of Farmer Francis and his captors came his two sons, James and John, twenty-four and twenty-one, respectively. Both were virile young men, strong and slender like their father, but hardly a combined match for the even one of the two brutes holding him captive. Even so, both sons seemed to be stupidly contemplating the enormous task of tackling them, anyway.

Behind them, a beat or two away, burst in Bob Frelinger, a short, squat man whose face had swollen tomato-red in apparent fury. He was accompanied by his boys, Matthew and Mark, nine and seven, who spent a great deal of their time simultaneously trying to ignore their hysterical father and tag the other one "it."

At the end of the train—lengthy as it was, Mortis was able to polish off most of his meal and clear his bench—came Old Nathaniel escorting the wives of the two farmers.

Esther Frelinger, a deliciously plump young woman of twenty-nine, rather plain and delightfully ordinary looking, wiped the tears from her eyes and rushed to her husband's side, embracing him tightly as he tried to shove her away.

"Oh, Bob!" she wailed. "Bob! Oh, Bob!" She stopped and took a breath. "Bob-o Bob-o Bob-o Bob-o Bob-o Bob..."

"Shut up, woman!" he snapped at her, trying to peel her off of him. She knelt to the floor, squeezing her pudgy body tightly to his legs. Tears streaked down her already distorted, reddened face.

Ruth Bacon, Farmer Francis' wife, came next. She was a frighteningly beautiful woman, only twenty-seven, tall and thin, holding her head high. She was what the people of Peer Gynt referred to as an "outsider." Farmer Francis had met her at a seed sale in Kansas City

and brought her home. Mortis never thought she quite fit in. She stayed comfortably away from her captive husband, holding her two-year-old son, Job, in her arms. After giving up hope of releasing their father from the Herculean grips of Isaac and Eli, James and his brothers went to stand affectionately by their step-mother.

Ruth was Farmer Francis' *second* wife, Mortis remembered suddenly, remembering, also, his distaste at the farmer for remarrying so shortly after his first wife's death. The first Mrs. Bacon, a woman who Mortis, in his youth, would have considered a class act, had died painlessly in a freak combine accident. The second Mrs. Bacon was too thin, too flashy, for his now extinct tastes. Who knows what Francis saw in her!

They were a motley bunch, Mortis O'Toole reflected to himself in this, his favorite type of chaos—the sort where people were usually waiting for him to say something. It was during these precious moments that he liked to step back and quietly make it known that he was surveying the situation.

So he did.

Isaac and Eli had Farmer Francis' skinny arms held tightly and insignificantly between theirs, holding him slightly, just barely, high enough for his feet to swing perfectly free from the constraints of gravity.

Farmer Bob was trying to remove his wife from around his legs the way a child would step out of a blown up inner-tube after swimming out of the pond.

Ruth Bacon seemed to be teaching Job by magnificent example how to make disgusted looks with his face.

James and John were showering their step-mother with concern and devotion the way they'd protect a puppy from the rain. James, the older of the two, was standing boldly next to her, occasionally brushing a stray hair from her face or offering to hold his step-brother should her arms get tired. John, the younger, was trying unsuccessfully to get her attention.

Matthew and Mark had raced cheerfully out of the Hall.

The smell of cheddar cheese still held Mortis' nostrils. He picked at a glob stuck behind his back, left molar and swallowed it.

Old Nathaniel was mumbling to himself and looked as if he might say something out loud, so Mortis intervened.

He leaned forward, saying pleasantly, "Can somebody please explain this situation for me?"

Farmer Bob, having shucked his wife from him, stepped forward. "I can, your honor."

Mortis leaned back and smiled at him. "Very well, then, Mr. Frelinger. You have the floor." Judge O'Toole was, if nothing else, extremely adamant about parliamentary procedure, specifically *his* parliamentary procedure.

Farmer Bob began by pacing back and forth on his stubby legs and waving around his stubby arms. "I found him, your honor, Farmer Francis there, that lying, two-faced son of a cock and a hen! that cow

fornicator! that bull sodomizer! I found that miserable, sneaky, dirty, lying, thief of a home wrecker *in bed with my wife!!!*" His speech grew to a shout towards the end, his face deepening from tomato red to egg plant purple.

Mortis waved him back down to a dull roar. "Yes, yes, Mr. Frelinger. No editorializing, please."

"Sorry, your honor."

Mortis looked over at the still-captive Farmer Francis. "Mr. Bacon? Is this true?"

Farmer Francis did his best to squirm his tall, spindly body in the grasp of the two giants beside him. "Well, you see, your honor... it's not exactly like it—"

"YES!!! IT'S TRUE!!!" Esther Frelinger wailed from the floor where her husband had left her, dropping her face to the ground and thrusting her behind into the air. "It's true! I confess! Farmer Francis and I did it!!!"

"Shut up, woman!" Farmer Francis hissed.

"I can't keep it in me any longer!" she cried. "We sinned! We had sex! We gave in to lust! We let our bodies turn the evil around us into a hot, sweaty intersection with the devil himself!"

"Thank you. That's enough. Yes.. thank you," Mortis said, mopping his now sweaty brow and trying to regain order in his courtroom, though he let them continue for a moment while he searched for his gavel.

"Just me, Francis and Satan!" she sobbed. "What shall I do? *What shall I do???*"

"You should be quiet," Mortis said from behind his desk, glancing up again at her full rump.

"I should be punished!" Esther sobbed. "I should be beaten! What do they do with women like me!?"

"He said, SHUT UP!!!" Farmer Francis snapped.

A tear began to roll down Farmer Bob's cheek. "Esther, please!" he begged.

"A scarlet 'A' should be branded on my chest!" She ripped open her blouse, tearing her corset down to her belly. Two large white breasts flipped out and bounced around as she shook them back and forth; red nipples pointed at the Judge's bench. "Brand me!" she cried. "Brand me!"

Mortis found his gavel and looked back up. He immediately dropped it to the floor, and dropped it again, before he was able to sustain his trembling enough to slam the hammer down on his bench. "Yes, yes. Thank you, Mrs. Frelinger," he stuttered. "Your opinion is noted. Bailiff! A blanket, if you'd please." Old Nathaniel stepped out of the room and back in again a few seconds later with an old woolen blanket. He walked it up to Esther, who said thank-you and reached for it but found Old Nathaniel just a step out of reach. After a bit of a struggle, she managed to wrestle the wrap from him. He returned to his seat in a daze.

Mortis banged again. SLAM! Silence slowly followed, his

favorite kind of silence (the sort that immediately follows extreme loudness). After a few moments to reflect upon what he'd just witnessed, he spoke. "Well, there. It seems we have the proof. Mr. Bacon, how do you plead?"

With a gnash of the teeth and a fierce glance at Esther, he growled, "Guilty."

"And you, Mrs. Frelinger?" Mortis said, turning on Esther. "Just for the record?"

"Guilty," she sobbed, and then to her husband she said, "Can you ever forgive me—" Mortis cut her off with a bang of the gavel.

"Very well, then," he said. "That was easy enough. Now, Mr. Frelinger, I suppose you seek some sort of recompense, eh?"

Farmer Bob stepped forward, looking back briefly at his wife, and nodded. "Yes, sir. I do."

Mortis looked at Ruth Bacon. "And you?"

Ruth glared at her husband and said, "Absolutely, your honor."

Mortis sat back and thought for a moment, the courtroom keeping still during the interim. Finally he leaned forward and said, "Well, the punishment should fit the crime. The Bible says, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."

Farmer Bob nodded. Farmer Francis rolled his eyes.

Mortis continued. "I think, then, that the only retribution here is for you, Bob Frelinger, and you, Ruth Bacon, to have an affair of your own."

"WHAT?!" Farmer Francis roared and for a second almost seemed to slither out of Isaac and Eli's grasp. They, on the other hand, merely sighed and settled themselves down to a more comfortably painful position upon his arms, turning his fingers blue.

Seeing him silenced, Esther decided to speak a few words of her own. "Now, I really don't think that's necessary, Judge O'Toole. I'm sure there's something else... Well, something that would be more..." She trailed off, apparently not thinking of anything.

Mortis looked at Farmer Bob. "Mr. Frelinger?" he asked. Farmer Bob had, by then, collected his jaw from the floor. "I dunno," he mumbled.

Ruth, on the other hand, handed Job over to her eldest step-son and jumped forward. "Yes!" she cried. "I think that's extremely fair!"

Farmer Francis tried to say something but failed in the attempt.

Farmer Bob looked at his groveling wife on the floor before him, round and luscious, plump and rosy, and then at Ruth Bacon beside him, young and skinny, with her perky breasts and small hips, and made a decision that Mortis found baffling, however just. "Yes," he said, taking her by the waist, stepping back from his pleading wife. "I think it's a fine compensation! Fine, indeed!"

"No," Farmer Francis said as loudly as he dared to. Nobody cared.

Mortis slammed his gavel down on the bench a fourth time. "Done! Splendid."

"No!" Farmer Francis yelled, this time receiving the painful notice

of Isaac and Eli.

Mortis turned on him. "It does you no good to complain. You brought this on yourself."

"But this is..." Esther Frelinger tried to say before she was cut off.

"I'm afraid you brought it on yourself, as well," Mortis said. "Now, let's get this over with, shall we? Bailiff! Deliver some sheets and some pillows to my ante-room, if you'd please." Old Nathaniel walked out silently.

Farmer Francis grumbled to himself. Esther, wrapped in the wool blanket, waddled over to him.

"Oh, Francis! This is horrible!" she exclaimed. Farmer Francis snarled at her but said nothing. After a few minutes of trying to gather his sympathies, she gave up.

Suddenly she said, "Oh... Judge O'Toole? How many times?"

"How many times what?" Mortis asked back.

"How many times are they going to..." Her voice, once again, trailed off. "You know..."

Mortis sat back and thought about it. "Well, I don't know," he said. He looked at Farmer Bob. "What do you think?"

Farmer Bob shrugged.

"Well?" Mortis asked back at the adulterous couple. "How many times was it?"

"Twice," Farmer Francis hissed.

"Ah!"

"Only twice," Farmer Francis said sternly, this time to Esther.

Esther thought to herself and said, "Well..." Farmer Francis tried to kick her, a feat difficult when you're positioned two inches off of the floor, and failed.

"Well, what?" Mortis asked her. "Only two times, yes," she said. "But not just two *times*."

"Ah!" Mortis said again. He nodded and looked at Farmer Bob who nodded and looked at Ruth who rolled her eyes and turned away. "How many actual times, then?" Mortis asked Farmer Francis.

After a few unsuccessful grunts, Farmer Francis said tersely, "Four." "No..." Esther said slowly, mentally counting.

"Five, then," Farmer Francis barked.

"No..."

Mortis stood up fiercely, crashing his belly down on the bench. "Sir!" he snapped. "The truth, please!"

Farmer Francis cowered. "Eleven," he said meekly.

"Jesus! Eleven!" Ruth grumbled, frustration hanging on her every syllable. She looked at Mortis.

"Eleven times," he said, sitting back down and banging his gavel once again.

Farmer Bob's rather large smile slowly faded to a frown. "Uh..." he said, "You know... this could take a little—"

"Take as long as you need," Mortis said.

Farmer Bob's smiled quickly returned.

Ruth turned back to Farmer Francis once more, shooting him a

“humph!” before dragging Farmer Bob back into the ante-room.

Exactly a week later, Mortis had lazily slumped his enormous body over the steps of the Hall and was enjoying his favorite type of breeze when his entire day was interrupted.

It was the sort of breeze that passed by Sarah Johnson’s house as she was baking pies for her grandchildren—she always used his favorite portion of sugar, lots. It was the sort of breeze that carried the smell all the way to him, wherever he was. He was sitting on the steps, enjoying his breeze and allowing the slow, lazy afternoon to sooth him when Rachel Smith stepped out of the carpenter’s shop and descried him.

“Descry” was a popular word back then and now seems to be the only word unusual enough to describe the elaborate motions she went through to indicate to him (and to the rest of the village) that she’d seen him.

“Judge!” she called. “Judge O’Toole!” She waved her hands in the air, hopping up and down a bit before purposefully striding over to him.

Mortis chose not to get up. The act of standing after a deliciously large meal was a particularly painful one for him. His bowels had just settled down and his chins were peacefully at rest. He didn’t want to disturb them. He did, however, offer her a curt nod and a greeting.

“Judge! I’ve got to talk to you about Saul,” she said as she neared him.

“By all means,” Mortis answered. “Have a sit with me on my break. I can think of no one I’d rather talk to on such a beautiful day.”

Rachel blushed and sat down. She sighed and leaned back, getting comfortable, pausing to sniff the air and stretch her arms.

She seemed to forget the reason she’d come. “What about Saul?” Mortis prompted.

She looked over at him. “Oh,” she said, “He’s still fighting.”

“And?”

“I had hoped that he would have taken what you said in earnest.”

Mortis nodded. “I suspect he did.”

“But...”

“I told Saul not to *start* any more fights. I believe he hasn’t and won’t.”

“Then why...?”

“Boys will be boys, Rachel. You know that.”

She nodded quickly. “Well, sure, but I was hoping he would stop fighting altogether.”

Mortis shrugged. “Young boys are full of energy,” he offered. “Is he getting hurt?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Are any of the other parents complaining?”

“Well... no.”

“Then, don’t worry. Your son is doing nothing wrong.”

Rachel nodded and sat still for quite a while before leaving. Mortis easily outlasted her, sitting stiller and waiting longer. Just as he was

about to try standing, though, a tremendous clamor caught his attention. A large crowd was approaching the Hall.

Farmer Francis' boys, James and John, were carrying Farmer Bob in their arms. They lead a small crowd consisting of Isaac and Eli Toberson, who were, once again, holding Farmer Francis tightly. Old Nathaniel (of course) came next with the rest of Farmer Francis' and Farmer Bob's families.

Esther Frelinger was crying, wringing an invisible dishrag out with her soft, plump hands. Matthew and Mark Frelinger were clutching onto their mother's skirt, though she seemed not to notice. Ruth Bacon held Job in her arms, soothing him. Job was snoring.

Farmer Francis was mad, quite insane, though probably only temporarily. "I hope you die!" he spat at Farmer Bob. "I hope you rot in hell!" He was kicking and struggling and surprising Isaac and Eli at how well he was doing.

Farmer Bob, in the arms of his adversary's sons, was whining and moaning, clutching onto a knife stuck in his side. He did not notice Farmer Francis' suggestions. Esther Frelinger was wailing. "Booobbbb! Don't diiiieeee!!!"

Quickly Mortis ushered them into the Hall and instructed James and John to lay Farmer Bob on a table.

"Right there, please. That's fine." They gently laid him down, Farmer Bob groaning at every movement. Mortis looked around for Old Nathaniel. "Bailiff? If you don't mind, go get the doctor, please." Old Nathaniel snapped a quick salute and slowly marched out. The two families quickly separated—Esther Frelinger and her sons to the left side of the court room around the table holding her punctured husband and Ruth Bacon, accompanied quite closely by James and John, to the right side near (but not too near) Isaac and Eli... and the lunatic.

"Now," Mortis said to them, "I think somebody ought to explain this to me."

James Bacon, Farmer Francis' eldest son, stepped forward slightly, still keeping himself between Ruth and his younger brother. James was a younger image of his father with the addition of a few traits his late mother must have added to the gene pool—charm and common sense being among them. "I can, your honor," he said.

"Then, please do," Mortis replied, climbing up to sit behind his bench.

James paused, collecting his thoughts, before starting. "We followed Father from the fields this afternoon. He just left. Suddenly, you know? And we followed him, because it wasn't like him to just walk off, and we wanted to know where he was going. He wouldn't answer us when we called after him. Instead, he ran. We caught up to him, of course, but he wouldn't stop to talk to us. So we just followed along. We'd have stopped him, you know—we knew something was wrong when we realized he was headed for Farmer Bob's house—but we remembered what you always taught us. Honor thy father. You know?"

Mortis nodded and motioned for him to continue.

"Well, we followed him, trying to get him to stop and talk, but he wouldn't. And we tried to stop him when we got there, but he was too fast. He stabbed Farmer Bob before we could do anything about it."

Mortis looked over at the loudly groaning form of Farmer Bob on the table. "Is this true, Mr. Frelinger?"

"Stabbed him!" Esther cried. "He stabbed him!"

Farmer Bob moaned a bit. He attempted a cough, but quickly stopped. "Yes, your honor," he said weakly.

"Die, bastard! Die!" Farmer Francis yelled. "I hope that knife sends you to hell!"

Mortis nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Frelinger. And thank you, Mr. Bacon. That sounded like a confession."

"Yes! YES! I hope he goes to—"

"I think we get the picture, Mr. Bacon," Mortis said, cutting him off. "Isaac? Eli? If you can think of any way to keep Mr. Bacon quiet, please help yourself."

The two brutes nodded and dumped Farmer Francis, who still had a lot to say, in a chair. As he was screaming at them and at the public in general, they each clamped a hand down on his shoulder blades and neck and squeezed. His shouts shifted quickly to a squeal and then to silence. He seemed inclined to sit still after that, but their hands remained, just in case.

By that time, Old Nathaniel had returned with Doctor Amos Threcher, who was examining Farmer Bob, now stripped of his shirt and bleeding freely onto the floor.

"How is he, Doctor?" Mortis asked.

Amos, with a quick and decisive motion, flipped the knife out of its hole. "He'll be fine, I think," he said. "It's almost a flesh wound. Missed the kidney and the liver—probably—but I'll wager that a tight wrap and a few sutures will stop the bleeding." He pulled from his bag a large towel and ripped it in half. One half he replaced in his bag, and the other he placed over the wound. After doing so and instructing Farmer Bob to hold it down with considerable pressure, he began to thread a needle with some surgical stitching.

Mortis looked back at Farmer Francis. "Mr. Bacon, you amaze me. Why bring upon yourself more trouble?"

Farmer Francis had begun to inhale as if to retort when a warning squeeze from Isaac and Eli stopped him. "He had my wife," he said in a low grumble.

Ruth snorted but said nothing.

"And you had his," Mortis answered for her. "Fair is fair."

Farmer Francis simply mumbled to himself. Isaac and Eli apparently decided to let that go unpunished.

Mortis looked back at Farmer Bob and his companion. "Doctor Threcher? Are you finished?"

"Not yet," Amos replied, sliding his needle into Farmer Bob's side, the cries of pain echoing in the background.

Mortis nodded and sat back. "Bailiff?" he called. Old Nathaniel

stood up. "Get the knife. Clean it and sterilize it. Perhaps a fire in my chambers would do the trick." He paused, thinking to himself before adding, "In the fire place, preferably."

Old Nathaniel saluted again and left with the knife.

Esther Frelinger had, in the mean time, stepped forward. "Your honor? May I speak?" she asked, wiping the tears from her eyes.

"Yes," Mortis said, "if you'll promise to keep your chest covered."

Her soft, billowing cheeks flushed brightly. She nodded and said "What's going to happen to him?" she asked.

"Well, it looks like he's going to be all right," Mortis told her.

"No," she said, pointing at Farmer Francis, "I mean, *him*."

Ruth Bacon stepped forward to challenging her. "What about him?" she said.

Mortis quickly interrupted. "Ladies, please. One at a time. We don't need another dispute to settle here." They stopped and backed away from each other. "Esther, we *will* find a punishment to fit the crime. Mr. Bacon's act will not go unnoticed in the eyes of this court."

"And what's it to you, anyway?" Ruth snapped at her. "If it wasn't for you, this never would have happened."

"Me?" Esther said, shocked.

"If you hadn't seduced him—"

"He seduced me!" Esther cried.

Bang! Mortis slammed his gavel down. "Ladies, please!"

"Harlot!" Ruth hissed.

"Bitch!" Esther mumbled.

"That's enough!" Mortis shouted.

"Slut!"

"Tramp!"

Mortis stood up, catching his mighty gut on the bench and knocking it momentarily up in the air onto two legs. It crashed back down again with a tremendous slam that jostled everything on the surface, knocking a book or two over onto the floor. The deafening noise frightened the women into submission.

"Silence!" he bellowed. He paused a moment to make sure they stayed quiet before he sat back down. Then he turned to the delightfully chubby woman quivering—almost erotically—before him. "Now, Mrs. Frelinger," he said, "she *is* right. If it hadn't been for your adultery, I believe this would not have happened."

"But—" Esther started.

"It takes two to fornicate, Mrs. Frelinger. At least, that's what I'm told."

"But he..."

"Are you saying it was rape?" Mortis asked.

Esther lowered her head. "No," she said quietly, giving up.

"Fine. Now, Mrs. Bacon," he said, turning to the scrawny woman next to Esther, "have you something to say?"

She, too, lowered her head. "No."

"Do you wish to speak on your husband's behalf?" She looked over at Farmer Francis as he looked up at her, pleading. She raised her

head proudly, looked back at Mortis, and said, "No," before marching back to where her step-sons waited.

Old Nathaniel walked back into the room holding the knife delicately in one hand, smoke rising from the blackened blade.

"Ah, yes. Thank you, Nathaniel," Mortis said, getting a salute in reply.

"Doctor," Mortis called, "are you finished?"

"Just so," Amos replied, having snipped off the end of his thread and wrapped a heavy bandage around Farmer Bob's side.

"Mr. Frelinger?" Mortis asked. "Do you think you could walk?" Farmer Bob sat up slowly. "Probably."

"Splendid," Mortis said happily.

"Isaac? Eli? Please remove Mr. Bacon from his shirt." Quickly, they did.

"Now, Doctor, if you'd please, illustrate on Mr. Bacon, here, the exact nature of the wound."

Amos took from his bag a large grease pencil and walked over to Farmer Francis. He made a point on the right side of his belly and drew a quick line down the side of his abdomen about three inches long. "The knife entered here below the ribs and sliced downwards, starting shallow but getting deeper. I wouldn't say more than two-thirds of the blade's length. Maybe three inches deep." He finished his description and backed away quickly.

"Thank you, Doctor," Mortis said. "Bailiff? Hand Mr. Frelinger the knife."

Old Nathaniel carefully gave the knife to Farmer Bob.

"Isaac? Eli? Stand Mr. Bacon up and hold him firmly in place."

They did so quite effectively.

Mortis smiled and sat back, folding his arms over his full stomach.

"Mr. Frelinger, if you would—be careful. Stay on track. No more than three inches deep. And no vital organs, please."

The next two weeks went by without incident, and, once again, Mortis O'Toole found himself lounging on the front steps of the Town Hall sniffing the pies Sarah Johnson was baking.

"Ahhh..." he said to himself. "Rhubarb!" His mouth watered at the tart smell of his favorite delicacy. He was still salivating, still dreaming of asking Sarah for a pie or two, when Amos Threcher strolled up to him.

"Howdy, Judge," the doctor said.

Mortis sucked back his spit and straightened up, managing to stand. "Ah, Amos. Hello. I was just thinking about desserts."

Amos sniffed the air deeply. "Rhubarb, today, isn't it?"

Mortis chuckled. "I believe so." They both sat down and leaned back on the steps enjoying the moment for a while before either of them spoke.

"Bit of nasty business you had here, eh?" Amos said.

"Oh?"

"Bob and Francis." Mortis sighed.

"Yes. I suppose. How are they, by the way." "Nicked his kidney, I think. But Francis'll be all right. Bob's back in the fields."

Mortis nodded. "That's good. His boys are too young to do it by themselves."

Amos nodded and was about to speak when a bloody, ragged form turned the corner and raced towards them. "What the hell...?" he mumbled. Mortis stood up, leaning on Amos' frail shoulder for support and, for the moment, ignoring the curse.

"Saul!" he called. Amos stood up beside him, and both men rushed to the panting, bleeding child who was about ready to fall over in the street.

"Saul!" Mortis said when they caught him. "Saul! What's the matter?"

The boy merely groaned. Amos ripped his shirt off and raced to the well to dampen it. When he got back, he wiped clean the blood from the boy's cheeks. Luckily, most of it was from small wounds and tears along his body—nothing serious.

"What happened?" Mortis asked again when the boy's eyes finally opened. Saul shuddered.

"They all took up on me."

"Have you been fighting again?" Mortis asked.

"I was only fighting back," Saul replied, "Like you said. I'd try to say something to get 'em fighting first so I could hit back. And then I'd beat up on 'em good."

Mortis grinned. "Yes," he said, "Go on."

"Well, this time they cornered me. All of 'em." He shook his head. "Outta nowhere. I never saw it coming. I don't know what happened."

Mortis nodded. "Well, don't worry. You're going to be okay, and tomorrow you can get them back. Every single one of them."

Saul shook his head. "Nuh-uh! I ain't fightin' no more. I'm done."

"But they beat up on you, Saul. Without provocation, in fact," Mortis exclaimed. "They need to be punished."

Saul groaned and massaged his ribs. "Maybe I had it comin'," he muttered.

Mortis shook his head. "That was justice. The fights they started they deserved. This time they jumped on you for no reason. They should be punished."

Saul closed his eyes as Amos wiped blood from his forehead. "Well, somebody else can do it, then," he sighed. "I ain't fightin'."

Mortis frowned, pondering this, when he noticed Old Nathaniel running towards them. Amos was tearing his shirt into strips and using them as wraps for a couple of the cuts on Saul's arms and legs as the old man approached. Mortis stood up to greet him. Old Nathaniel, out of breath and wheezing like a spent race horse, took a few minutes to calm down.

"Yes?" Mortis asked several times. Finally he spoke. "You've got to come out to Farmer Bob's place. You gotta come now."

"Why?" Mortis asked, slightly alarmed and slightly amused at the old man's persistence.

"Just come!" was all Old Nathaniel would say, trying to pull Mortis along by his shirt cuff.

"You'd better come out, too, when you're done," Mortis said to Amos. The doctor nodded quickly, and Mortis let himself be pulled along. He noticed the smoke shortly after that.

The two men arrived at a horrible scene. The large house Farmer Bob had built for his family was blackened with smoke and flame. Fire rippled along all sides fiercely and passionately. Not an inch had been spared. The walls were still standing, still holding up the roof, but the glass windows had long since shattered and the loud, occasional snapping noises warned of an impending collapse.

Two short, stout figures, blackened with soot, knelt on the ground some distance away from the disintegrating house. As he drew closer, Mortis saw it was Farmer Bob holding his wife, both of them kneeling on the ground and crying. Esther's sobs were to be heard even over the roar of the fire as her giggling body gasped and shuddered.

Nearby, Farmer Francis had slumped to his bony knees and buried his face in his hands. Ruth, looking pale and cold, was standing apart from him with Job in her arms. James Bacon held her shoulders as she leaned against his chest. The other Bacon boy, John, was kneeling next to his father, trying to comfort him. Apparently he could not.

Matthew Frelinger sat still on the ground beside his parents. His eyes were open wide. He did not move. His shaggy blond hair was wriggling wildly in the wind as his vacant eyes stared into space.

It wasn't until then that Mortis' deft nostrils picked up the peculiar smell and his observant eyes noticed the apparent lack of a second Frelinger boy. He looked around and saw the charred, crisp figure on the ground in front of Farmer Bob's burning home. The figure was roughly the shape and size of Mark Frelinger, give or take an inch or two, which could have been accounted for by some now missing hair.

His suspicions were confirmed when he heard Esther wail, "He was only seven!"

The sickly sweet smell of melted, smoldering flesh convinced him to lead the two families even further away from the grotesque scene. They walked with him, out toward the fields, stunned and sluggish.

"Nathaniel," Mortis whispered, gathering the attentions of the old man, "Go fetch Isaac and Eli and anybody else you can find. Get Amos. Go now." Old Nathaniel nodded and ran off, top speed.

As the two families settled down, each on other sides of Mortis, he spoke to them. "Once again, here we are. Frankly, I'm not surprised. Mr. Bacon, can you tell me what happened?"

Farmer Francis, who had, by that time, re-buried his face in his hands, looked up. "I tried to save him," he said, "I tried!" He held out his two arms, badly blistered, cracked and bleeding. "I went in, but it was too late." He said nothing more, simply hiding his face again and letting a muffled wail escape his mouth every once and a while.

"Mr. Frelinger?" Mortis asked. "Mrs. Frelinger?" But both of them were too busy sobbing to notice. "No, I suppose not," Mortis mumbled to himself. "Anybody?"

For a long while no one answered. Finally, James Bacon, still holding Ruth close to him, spoke. "The old man burned it down."

"Your father?" Mortis asked.

James nodded. "We didn't even see him go this time. Ruth came running out of the house and told us he'd gone. I suppose we all figured we knew where he went."

Ruth spoke quietly, saying, "He must have thought nobody would be home."

"He must have," James said.

"He'd been talking about it, but I thought it was the fever," Ruth added quickly. "He fell sick somewhat after the knife."

James hushed her, patting her hair and kissing her forehead. Job woke up in her arms and yawned.

Mortis nodded and paced. He walked over to Farmer Francis and looked down at him. "So you snuck over here thinking to burn the place down when everybody was away, eh?"

The man before him looked up. "No one should've been there. I've been watching the place every day for a week now. They all go out to the fields."

"*HE HAD A HEADACHE!*" Esther screamed jumping up, trying to race over to Farmer Francis, but a tremendous crash from the flaming building behind her caused her to shriek in terror and fall to the ground. Her husband caught her and held her close to him.

"He had a headache," he said as she trembled in his grasp.

"I didn't know," Farmer Francis mumbled.

"Of course you didn't," Mortis said, turning to see Old Nathaniel approaching with a crowd of other men, Isaac and Eli among them. Amos Threcher trotted over to him.

"They say the house is finished, Judge. There's nothing we can do but keep it from spreading," the doctor said.

Mortis nodded. "Please do so, then. And tell the others to watch out for the body in the front yard." He turned back to the two families, leaving a dazed Amos to stagger back to the crowd. The Toberson's lumbered forward shortly after.

"Isaac, Eli—watch Mr. Bacon," Mortis said to the pair of giants. "See that he doesn't leave. But mind the arms," he added.

He turned to watch the rest of the men surround the house with shovels, extinguishing the smaller fires that were spreading outward and digging a trench around the now fallen frame. He nodded in satisfaction and turned back around.

"A crime has been committed here," Mortis said. "What can we do but punish the criminal?"

"Yes," Farmer Bob said.

"A-Men!" Old Nathaniel wheezed.

Mortis ignored them. "You committed a murder, Mr. Bacon. Mark Frelinger is dead." He pointed first at Farmer Francis and then at the charred boy, off in the distance.

"Slain!" Old Nathaniel cried, raising his hands to heaven.

"Slain!"

"I'm so sorry..." Farmer Francis said, tears in his eyes.

"It won't bring back a life!" Mortis roared. He paused dramatically.

"What are we going to do?!"

"I don't know..."

"What shall be done?!"

"Anything... anything..."

Meanwhile, Old Nathaniel, dancing up and down in the background, had begun to shout. "Eye for an eye! Tooth for a tooth!"

Farmer Bob stood up and nodded. "Hand for a hand," he said.

Esther stood with him. "Foot for a foot." She could barely whisper.

"A-Men!" Old Nathaniel cried.

Mortis walked over to Ruth and held his hands out to her. "Life for a life," he said.

"NO!" she screamed, hiding herself and her baby in James's arms, who had himself begun to tremble a little.

"Little Mark was the youngest," Mortis said softly.

Nathaniel began chanting: "Mark bark Mark bark Mark bark Mark bark..." Everybody ignored him.

"Child for a child," Mortis said softly, reaching for the crying baby she clutched in her arms. She tried to shrink away, tried to run, but James held her firmly in place, and though he did nothing to take Job away from her, he did nothing to stop Mortis from taking the baby himself.

Mortis held him in his arms, tickling his chin to get him to stop crying. It didn't work. James held Ruth tightly. She tried to push away from him, but he wouldn't let go. Finally, exhausted, she slumped over. He caught her by the waist and hoisted her up close to him. When she opened her eyes again, she wrapped a delicate hand around his shoulders and held onto his neck.

Farmer Francis had tried to stand up, but a gentle push from Isaac and Eli kept him down.

"One of you watch him," Mortis said to them. "One of you come with me." Isaac left Eli to watch the weeping farmer on the ground.

"Nathaniel," Mortis called to the dancing figure, bouncing around in the background. Old Nathaniel stopped and stumbled over to him. "Go get a torch from the burning house. Get a strong one; we need that flame. And then find some rope and meet me at Francis Bacon's house."

Nathaniel ran off in the direction of the dying inferno.

"My house?" Farmer Francis pleaded to the judge and pastor.

"Home for a home," Farmer Bob said.

"Child for a child," Esther whispered again.

Ruth turned away, her eldest step-son holding her tenderly in his arms.

Mortis O'Toole turned and walked off, Job held tightly in his arms.

Old Nathaniel could still be heard off in the distance crying, "*A-MEN! A-MEN!*"

DOUBLE JOINTED

Chad Parish

Ellery Cain's blue knitted hat looked like a skullcap, and her wiry gray hair fingered up around its edge. Her face was creviced and worn. Eroded eyebrows and thin, white lashes. She was neither as old as she appeared, nor eccentric as her neighbors thought. Eccentricity implied identity, she thought. Ellery was nobody. Her mind was full of other people and other people's things.

In thirty-one years, no one on Pine Street had heard her speak. Preposterously strange. They saw her only on Tuesday and Thursday. Silently in and out. Tuesday she itemized her landscaping curiosities and on Thursday she added items to her yard. Junk. Her yard was small and overgrown. Pack-ratted. Tight, but well-inventoried. Some days the wind blew the unassuming oak trees that sagged over her barn-red house. But usually it was still.

In the monkey grass, empty plastic milk jugs filled with rocks and acorns bordered the flower beds. Around the entire yard and down the sidewalk. Lined up 2%, 1%, Whole, 2%, 1, Whole. Large bracelets of old tires encircled the holly bushes. Under the river birch was an old desk and a rusty grey filing cabinet. Stacked around in various spots were chairs and pots. Cinder blocks and old televisions. Torn lamp shades. Parts and parts. Things that nobody wanted anymore. Something with which she could affiliate. Something hers alone.

Some mornings the red aluminum flag on her purple mailbox went up. Especially for the last couple of months. She would stand topless in the window until the postman took her letters. Just watching. He'd look up and grimace at the white, ghastly wrinkled bosom behind the panes. Crazy bitch. But she wasn't eccentric.

Ellery had no bills to pay. She had none of the respective services; no power, no plumbing, no phone, no garbage pick-up. Luxuries. There was plenty of room under the back yard to bury trash, anyway. It was a wonder that she didn't freeze to death during the winter, or starve during the other seven months. But no one seemed to question these modern-day quirks of hers. Why should they question?

Ellery was not destitute. She wasn't sorry for anything. She wasn't sorry that she had casually begun to overlook herself. That she had become quite obese. She was otherwise relatively healthy. Sicknesses hardly ever set in. And the few times they had, Ellery doctored herself. A real physician overcharged. But she had the red house on Pine Street. And her children in Muddy Waters, Alabama. Bastards. Even the two little girls. They had her long toes and double joints, and probably their father, Byron's, oily-itchy scalp.

She fled Muddy Waters for North Carolina when she was twenty. Left it all. Except the 3,012 dollars in rolled bills that Byron had stashed in one of his tube socks. She had finally had enough of the beatings and the red-dirt poverty. The leaning trailer and the lawn flamingos. The skinny greasy-

haired brats that whined and ate. On the afternoon that the police came to take away the children's father for violating his parole, the Housing Department came to take the children to the Home. Three, four, five, six, seven years old. Relief. Breathing room.

Ellery had always dreamed of marrying a man with a dark-hairy chest and small ears. They would have a scenic, landscaped lawn. No kids. So she took her chances and hitch-hiked to Salem, North Carolina to search for someone thin and healthy. Like herself. No reason really for that particular city. It was the setting for the soap opera she had watched on channel three. The way that Salem whispered and hummed on the television speaker. Intoxicating.

Nights there usually ended her up in a stupor, or in the sweaty bed of some hairy-backed lowbrow. Usually both. So she moved about a hundred miles to the south. Down to Aditrea, South Carolina. There she could have her yard. Unmarried. Depressed. Self-medicated. The Pine Street yard sufficed as a photo scrapbook. She loved to have pictures. To be able to show off all the people that were hers.

James Augustus was her first child. A son who had vied to finish high school, college, and graduate school. On his own. He was the rotting desk under the tree. Papers falling through the waterlogged underside of the drawers. Dried bird droppings glazed on the cherry veneer. Ellery searched months for him. And finally tracked him down after three or so dozen letters to agencies and possible adopting families. The letter:

Dearest Son,

I am sorry for any pain that I might have caused you in the last few years. I'm sure that you remember the day that you left our home. For years I have not been myself. I wanted to do what was best for you and your three other brothers and sisters, but I think that we just needed time. For a year or two I have been very sick. I've lost a lot of weight. The doctor said that I'm anemic. I feel so embarrassed for not being able to care for myself. I am not writing you to make you feel bad for not trying to contact me. I forgive you and need your love. I miss you. You know that, though. I know the things that you need.

I knew you'd be glad to hear from me. I can't wait until you come to visit. The house and lawn have been manicured to perfection for the time that you would find me and surprise me with a visit and maybe flowers.

I would write more. I have so much to tell you about how wonderful my life has since you moved away. I fell in love and got married. I bet you didn't know that your father and I were never married. My arthritis has been acting up lately. We can't really afford the pain medication. It was important that I write you, though. I don't mind the pain of writing a small note. I'm so proud of you. I know that you are making a good living at your engineering job, so you can take good care of yourself. Fondly,

your Mother,

Ellery

Lies. James sent money to her out of guilt. Conscious-driven. He wrote a curt note: *Don't write me again, Ellery.*

She called him collect at work the next Wednesday from the phone booth at A&P. To check up on him since she knew where he was. Bastard. Ellery wanted. Jim hung up on her. She went into the store and bought a five-pound bag of potatoes.

TWENTY-FIVE YEAR REUNION OF THE

Mark S. Price

Bangkok, our heroin-
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We spied tawn-
y ewe
of smoggy Datsundowns.

You held
fast
loose from us, though
Buddha (-nseen)
p/brayed silently
in awe
at our slip
grip calamities.

Too, you covered your belly while
bedevilling ours.

Whether't wasn't
Or's not to be
fluor-essenced mythologic, we
sexed and smoked re-
ality
in unripe crimes bathetic.

INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF BANGKOK

We'd leapt aboard OUR Sixties **bus**,
but (Americans all ways) **bus-**
y parents scarce missed **us**.

Driven hard
Those years were perilled fun
not deigning to come back
for our long dead young
companions

When rescue plans	failed pimply knaves (')
we cohorts railed	hollow/"hello"
at your libertine	enclaves.
If in vilest glee	w/we dreamt that stage,
but strive yet to	reprise it,
gravesite friends	and
state-side trends	now heed age.

I THOUGHT I SAW SATAN ON THE INTERSTATE

Charlotte Alane Majerick

It
upsets
me
so
much
I
don't
even
want
to
think about it.

THE GALLERY

Spring, 1995

Debora C. Myles is a student in the MFA program in art with a concentration in painting. She was recently chosen one of 10 outstanding master's graduate students at Auburn University. She says her "Cancer Series," from which these four works are taken, is about "healing -- of the body and the spirit."

Stephen Klesius graduated from Auburn in the fall of 1994 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. He is currently living in Rome, Georgia.



Debora C. Myles



Debora C. Myles



Debora C. Myles



Debora C. Myles



Stephen Klesius



Stephen Klesius



Stephen Klesius

SEE ROCK CITY

Kyes Stevens

Janice drove up Highway 53 towards Chattanooga, Tennessee, early on a Thursday morning in the middle of October, in Sam's old Ford truck that was the color of the magnolia leaves in the cemetery in Montevallo, Alabama. She was thinking of the cemetery now, as she drove alone, towards an unknown destination, because she was looking for the sense of power that the cemetery gave her. Her grandmother, who was the first woman to ride in an Alabama state rodeo, was buried there, and Janice admired her courage and strength to step forward and face a world that thought women should be at home raising children.

Janice had been living with Sam for five months in Smiths's Trailer Park in Columbiana where Sam worked at the papermill as a night watchman and Janice worked as a waitress at the First and Last Chance Lounge on the county line. When Janice met Sam at the bar, he was a gentleman at first. It wasn't until three months later, when she moved in with him, that he called her honey and baby and shoved her against the wall of his trailer. Tonight he'd hit her because she didn't buy beer. But this time, there were no tears or angry words on Janice's part. She walked out, slammed the door, and drove Sam's truck through the chain-link fence that surrounded the lot. As she went through the fence, metal crunched, and she thought about how she didn't give a damn whether the truck got messed up or not. Hurting the truck was like hurting Sam, which is what she wanted to do.

On the way out of Shelby County, Janice had passed by her parents' house. There were no lights on or she would've stopped to tell them that she was leaving and that she didn't know if she was ever coming back. Last Sunday, at dinner with her parents, there was the usual discussion about Janice's life. Her mother nagged her to get on with her life-to get out of Columbiana and go to school or find a real job and not wait on old drunk rednecks that lived at the hole-in-the-wall bar she worked at. Janice had once tried going to the junior college in Childersburg, but after two quarters she dropped out because she didn't like other people telling her what classes to take. Janice's mother told her that she had more potential to be successful than anyone else in the family and that she shouldn't live with Sam because he was always so insulting. But her father liked Sam. They would go out to the shop and work on fixing old trucks for racing. Her father had said that Janice needed a man like Sam, who could fix a car and take care of a woman. Right, she thought, I'm the one who takes care of him and all I get is an occasional trip to Birmingham for dinner or a trip to Wal-Mart.

Now, on the highway, it was getting hard for Janice to see the road—a dense fog was settling in the valley she was driving through. The sky looked like a gray blanket, ragged where the clouds wove through the trees on the mountain tops. She could only see the outline of the mountains when she passed a town; the lights would illuminate the sky. The cold air blew in through the gaps in the window and door frame, keeping her awake and angry—the truck was a worthless piece of junk that was not worth fixing, just like Sam, she thought. On the outside it looked great, with shining chrome on the bumpers and window trim that you could see your reflection in, like one of the trucks she'd seen in antique car magazines, but under the hood and on the interior, it was falling apart. About 25 miles from the Tennessee line, the truck started rattling and squealing and she guessed it was the fan belt. She pulled off at the next exit.

She stopped a two-story Holiday Inn in Fabius and parked in the back, underneath an orange security light. It was after three when she climbed in the back of the truck and pulled down the door of the camper shell. She tried to make a bed from a bale of hay that Sam had gotten for their dogs—his dogs now, she thought. She slept with all of her clothes on and covered herself with hay to stay warm. Looking out the window, she could see a light on in a room on the second floor, where she saw the silhouette of a woman sitting on a bed. A gust of cold air shook the truck and found its way inside the back, where the cracked rubber seals around the windows could not keep heat in or cold air out. Janice wondered why she hadn't gotten a room, maybe it was too late to check in, she thought. But she knew that wasn't true. She even had a credit card of Sam's that she could use until he canceled it. In the past, though, there were many times when they would load up the camping gear and hit the road for the weekend, and they always slept in the back of the truck. (Even then, the back of the truck felt comfortable to her.) As Janice watched a man sit down on the bed next to the woman in the window, she got a funny feeling, like it was going to be a long time before she ever knew the company of a man again—to have strong arms around her, holding her tight. But she thought, Sam didn't hold her like that, and right now, she wasn't lonely anyway. Janice decided she didn't need a room in the hotel—the truck with its cold air seeping in kept her aware of being alone, and independent, she thought.

Janice woke several times during the night, aching from the bed of the truck and the noise of rain pelting the metal top of the camper shell. When she'd begin to drift off, thunder and lightning would explode, and for an instant she could see everything around her, like the rain streaming down the drain pipes on the building and the semi-truck that was parked close to hers, which had its yellow light on. She sat up in the corner of the truck and listened to the night until she was tired enough to try to fall asleep again.

In the morning, Janice walked over to the Waffle House across the street from the Holiday Inn and got some coffee. The TV playing behind the counter had local weather on and they were warning people not to be outside unless they had to or travel because of the possibility of violent weather. There was a warning for severe lightning and tornados in the area. Great, Janice thought, just what I needed-not even be able to get out of the goddamned state.

Outside, after breakfast, Janice looked at the cloud formations in the sky-against the background that was the color of a dark bruise, with layers of full white clouds rippled across the sky like waves of sand. She tried to figure out if she should begin driving again. There was an auto parts store down the street toward the Piggly Wiggly, the man in the Waffle House told her, and so she walked down there to get a fan belt.

A man in the hotel parking lot offered to help Janice put on the belt, but Janice said coolly that she'd been working on cars and trucks since she could hold a wrench and that she could manage. After putting the belt on, Janice drove out of town. The sky didn't look too threatening; it wasn't giving her that closed-in feeling that she'd gotten from storms before, when she would sit on the porch at Sam's trailer, waiting and dreading for him to come home.

Along the road were maple and sycamore trees, with their fallen leaves of red and gold bordering the pavement. Seven miles out of Fabius it began to rain so hard that she only saw the yellow lines of the road when she passed over them. Janice was preoccupied with the possible reality of leaving behind everything she'd ever known and asking herself why she had stayed with Sam as long as she did. The monotonous drumming of the rain against the truck compounded the stress from trying to figure out what was going on in her life. But some things can't be identified as reasons or provocations, she thought; some things just happen. Then she heard the blaring of a horn and saw headlights headed right at her, like the eyes of a beast moving through the fall of rain, growing brighter. She swerved quickly, missing the car, but running off onto the shoulder of the road. She pulled over at the next paved spot on the side of the road, under a roof that shielded the rounded pumps of a deserted gas station. She could feel her heart pounding deeply against the inside of her chest and the muscles in her legs were rigid from mashing the brakes. She could've just been killed. Dead, she thought-and if things just happen for no reason, or for reasons we don't really understand, like rain and the changing of seasons, that meant she had no control over her life-like being stuck in the current of a river and not being able to get out. She couldn't predict if the next person she had a relationship with might be superficial like Sam or if it would make a difference if she left Alabama or not. But, she had to leave, she thought. She had to see if the path she was following was the right one.

Janice rested her chin on the steering wheel, saddened by the prospects of being stuck in a rut of Alabama red clay, where family ties and expectations keep you close to home. She looked out into the sheets of rain. The store had been closed for a while-the price of gas was 73 cents a gallon and there were no emission warning stickers plastered on the pumps. There was some pigweed growing next to the building and four or five of the glass panes in the door were cracked and clouded over. Janice noticed that hanging from the metal awning above her was a red maple leaf, held by a spider thread. She watched the leaf, suspended in air, as wind blew and slung the leaf in what seemed to Janice a perfect circle from the point of attachment. It spiraled around, dipping down and then suddenly jerked back up as a gust blew and broke the leaf free. Janice thought about how the leaf would land somewhere, maybe in the river across the road where it would float away, or on top of the ridge towering over the river. It was a matter of chance. Janice thought it might be nice to be like that leaf-to fly here or there without worrying about where it would land. Though it would be fighting, too-like a leaf floating up and down with the wind current, trying to reach up higher, constantly pushing for more.

Later that day, back on the road after falling asleep in the truck during the storm, Janice stopped at a bar and grille called Rowell's Country Kitchen. Inside, she ordered a beer and a burger with fries, and listened to the radio over the decrepit speakers hanging from the walls, one on the side of the cigarette machine and the other hanging above the bar next to the autographed picture of Hank Williams Sr. A song she'd heard only a few times before, called *Marshall County Red Clay*, was playing-it talked about small towns and the people who live there-folks staying in one place their entire lives. Janice thought again about the cemetery in Montevallo, particularly about her grandmother. She did amazing things, Janice knew, but she never got out of the state; she never even ate a Georgia peach right off the tree. Janice realized that she couldn't live in Columbiana her entire life; she couldn't be like all those people who'd never see the Northern Lights or the Golden Gate Bridge. There had to be something that she could do elsewhere. But she had to do it on her own; she couldn't use the help of anyone in the small town-like her parents, who would use their generosity towards her like a heavy chain keeping her staked to the ground. She walked over to the phone in the corner of the room, past a pool table that used to be green, and dialed Sam's number. She told Sam that the truck was parked at the little restaurant and that the woman at the counter had the keys. Sam asked what she was going to do. She was going to see Rock City, she told him, and Ruby Falls, and maybe she'd make it to California and see the Golden Gate.

ROSALYN ST.

Libby Lynn

the two-story house on Rosalyn street is 1500 miles away from now.
it has been all the years on my hands
since i spoke of that place;
i've covered the memories with college and black tattoos.
it has also been whispered that i have no past;
in ways, i do and do not - only what i remember.
no one would last long if they knew all the stories
of Rosalyn street.

inside the black and white
wood structure rest 3 generations of colorful monsters
and all the layered shame a city could stand, still
dozing in 3 dangerous hibernations.

i was born on its kitchen floor and kept clean
rooms in its cellar; i was thrown out
of its splintered doors and i escaped from its windows.
with my brothers i scaled the chimney and
with my sisters i slept in its closets -
we are all vague for obscene reasons.
it's a wonder i'm anywhere now.

the anecdote that doesn't cause a cringe
of amazement and disgust is the story
of the upstairs bathroom; i remember only
with my senses.

it was pink; it was the only door in the house that would lock
things in or out. when i was short
its mirrored cabinet called me over
in a search for prescription pills and razor blades.
with soft hands i opened it and found a box of band-aids
that had the scent
of television and cocaine
and six-foot sunflowers.

THE COTTON PROPHET

Jay Pongonis

Self-proclaimed Isaiah,
The ancient, dusky man sits,
Fiery eyes and smoky beard
The only animation;

His gnarled hands, oak skinned, sit
Calmly gripping the arm chair
Awaiting the next vision
To preach to the multitudes

Of disciples he's gathered:
Silently, cotton fields wait.
They fear his wrath as he raves
Again of diapers and shrouds.

His dark eyes burn fever-clear;
His hands' inspired movements,
Divinely choreographed,
Move with his prophetic voice

And its resonant timbre.
Apocalyptic visions
Of Whitney's demonic gins
And the cotton-pickers plumes

(Darkened by dust and soil
And fragmented cotton stems)
Reberverate from the prophet
Safe in his front porch pulpit.

The zealous visions abate
When, on the horizon,
The distant pillar of dust
Heralds the reapers' approach.

THE ABBEY

David Strowd

On the streets of New Orleans in the late fall, the winds off the Mississippi blow vengefully. They are bitter and cold, analogous to a side of New Orleans that most tourists never see, one of bums and whores and pimps and runaways. The winds refuse to be harnessed by the same laws as people, screaming through stop signs and blowing the wrong direction up one-way streets. A curious phenomenon takes place when these delta winds blow around the city: they suck a wide spectrum of people in, such as vacationers, derelicts, and entrepreneurs, but are unwilling to release anyone back out. They catch and hold their prey in a vise-like grip, eventually fitting them into whatever part of the city that is appropriate to their lifestyle; some stay of their own volition but most do not.

The entrance to The Abbey is marked only by an aging wooden sign that hangs above the doorway. It is located away from the revelry of Bourbon, but close enough to the French Market to maintain a steady flow of patrons who will stop to get a beer on hot days or a hot chocolate and Scotch on cold ones.

As I open the door, I see the people I usually sit with are already here (probably well into their third or fourth drink even though it is only 3:00 in the afternoon), and they look up and acknowledge my presence before bowing their heads back over the table, talking and writing furiously.

Honey, a college dropout living on the streets and the only waitress in The Abbey, brings me a Beck's before my ass even touches the seat of the chair. Honey is secretly in love with me, but what does that really mean anyway?

I sip the Beck's for a while and am able to surmise that my friends are making a blacklist of people who shouldn't be included in the Bill of Rights.

"Any college student who can't hold their liquor," proposes Thomas.

The other two high-five each other and then add this to the sheets of paper in front of each of them.

Thomas is about twenty-two, wears John Lennon sunglasses, and tells people he writes for a living. This initially drew me to him until I realized that if writing was really what Thomas did for a living, then he was indefinitely laid off and had little hope for success in the future. He spells terribly, writes even worse, and introduces himself as "T.S., like the poet, T. S. Eliot."

"How about anyone over the age of 25 who wears braces?"

This comes from Marcus, who is twenty-seven, black, and likable enough. It seems to me that Marcus' one flaw is that he is

constantly harping about the unfairness heaped upon him by what he refers to as "the Establishment." He blames the economy, Clinton, his second-grade Sunday school teacher, his mother, his father, the governor of Louisiana, the storming of the Bastille, me, and countless others as the reason for his perpetual unemployment. Personally, I think that he is unemployed because he sits in The Abbey drinking White Russians for eight to ten hours a day, throwing darts or shooting the shit with us.

"Anybody with facial hair," suggests Eve, a post-neo-hippie who is only about twenty. She left her home in Mobile and came to New Orleans three years ago. Her hair is long and brown and straight, her eyes are brown and doe-like, and her skin is smooth and clean. She works most nights at a daquiri shoppe on the corner of St. Charles and Toulouse.

"How about all hippies?" Thomas (I mean T. S.) shoots back.

"Thomas, a goatee isn't really facial hair. I'm talking about a full beard complete with mustache and sideburns. I didn't mean to offend you," she soothes.

"Think nothing of it; a writer is born to suffer. We must be prepared to walk the face of the earth, ridiculed and ostracized. This comes before one can write. And I wish you'd get it clear in that empty head of yours; it's T. S., not Thomas."

"Put down all the bums laying around the Square."

"Definitely."

"And the bartender at Quill's who wouldn't serve me because he said I didn't have the Tulane or Loyola look, whatever that is."

"Oh, that's good. How about **all** bartenders except the ones who give you too much change?"

"Anybody with a prosthesis, put that down."

"Marcus, that's cruel."

"I don't care, put it down!"

"Anybody who watches MTV."

"Anybody who watches TV at all."

"Right on."

One thing I like about Eve, besides her face and body, is the way she says things like "cool" and "right on" in the way that only a hippie can say it.

"All right, Blake, it's your turn."

Thomas and Marcus look at me hungrily, waiting, expecting. Eve smiles shyly.

"How about Catholics?" I ask uncertainly.

Eve and Marcus laugh and give each other high-fives but T. S. looks distressed.

"Hey, I'm Catholic."

"Are you really?"

"No...wait...I don't remember."

on the walls to read, and there aren't many yuppies and rich college kids staying in it for half an hour, snorting and laughing, like in the Uptown bars.

My tablemates' actions had confused and depressed me; truthfully, I was confused and depressed about a lot of things, but what they were doing was the only thing I could put my finger on. I stood there relieving myself, reading what was written on the wall in front of me, some of it humorous, some of it disturbing, but all of it very familiar: "Napoleon loves Josephine," "Here I sit, broken-hearted, had to shit but only farted," and my personal favorite, "I fucked your mom," with "Go home Dad, you're drunk," written below it.

Turning to leave after making sure that I haven't shaken anything off onto my jeans, I see something scrawled on the door. Unless I hadn't noticed it before, it had to be new: "Grow Up, New Orleans." As the blood rushes to my head, I start to feel faint, and I feel like I'm breaking out in a cold sweat. I'm so lightheaded that I fall back against the sink. Unclear images race through my head. I leave the bathroom and walk out onto the street without saying anything to the people sitting at our table.

Having somewhat regained my composure, I start walking through the Quarter towards Jackson Square. I think about coming to New Orleans when I was a child, along with my mother and father. My mother loved the painters in Jackson Square, and their acceptance of their station in life despite the fact that some of them had real artistic talent.

I pass two black kids on the street, both very young, tap-dancing with bottlecaps nailed to the bottom of their patent-leather shoes. As I'm taking out my wallet to get a dollar to drop into the cardboard box in front of them, I wonder where the mother of these kids is. Reaching for the dollar, I see a picture stuffed behind some check stubs and receipts. I take the picture out and when I look at it, I'm overcome with the same sensation that I felt in the bathroom of The Abbey. I vaguely remember putting this picture in here, but I don't remember when the last time I looked at it was. It shows my mother and my father, both in their early thirties, standing in our backyard. I remember taking it from a frame on my mother's armoire when I was in high school, then getting a pair of scissors and cutting my dad's image out of the picture.

Without dropping the dollar in the box, I turn abruptly and cross the street towards Jackson Square.

My mother died five months ago; I was a twenty-one year old freshman at the University of North Carolina. It was in June, after the second semester had ended, and I was living the good life in Chapel Hill. No classes during the summer, spending my parents' money, trying to take all the drugs in North Carolina.

My twin sister had called one afternoon while I was sitting on the couch, stoned, watching *Saved by the Bell*.

"Blake, Mom's sick. She took today off and she wants to talk to you."

"Why can't she call me?"

"She said every time she calls you you're not there and you never call her back. She wants to feel like you *want* to talk to her. Just give her a call. It'll make her feel better."

"All right. I'll call her later."

"Blake, is everything okay? You act like a different person sometimes."

"Yeah, I'm fine. I gotta go, okay? I'll talk to you later."

"Blake —"

"Bye." And I hung up.

Not surprisingly, I didn't call my mom that night. The next day she went to the doctor and he diagnosed her with pneumonia. My sister called again to remind me to get in touch with her. I made a note to be sure that I called when I woke up the next day, and then went out with my friends.

That night my mom had a mild heart attack, but her body, being weakened like it was, couldn't fight for itself. She died before she could be taken to the emergency room. After I found out what had happened, I got on a bus to New Orleans, skipped the wake and funeral, and have been here ever since. The bus trip was a long one, sixteen and a half hours. During the whole trip I smoked cigarettes and tried to shake off the realization that I couldn't remember when I'd last talked to my mom, and I couldn't even remember the last words I had said to her.

In Jackson Square, I walk around and think about my mom and how many times I had let her down. Occasionally, I look down at the picture, but mostly I just walk aimlessly. One of my favorite painters to watch in the Square is Ben, no last name, just Ben. He is about forty, has a grayish-brown beard, and wears boots, dull button-down shirts, and a cowboy hat to complete the Southwestern motif. Today, he is finishing a painting of a vase of roses. The painting is more lifelike and real than the vase of roses on a table next to the canvas that he is using for a model. Next to Ben, a man is painting a woman (probably a tourist) sitting motionless in a chair. The painting is good and more than does the woman justice. She is about the same age as my mom. I consider giving the picture to this painter and asking him to bring my mom to life from the picture; in my stressed state of mind, it seems perfectly rational and easy him to do the opposite of what he can already do well. I decide that the Quarter is rubbing off too much on me and I head to my apartment on Orleans, able to contain my tears until I get inside.

The next night in The Abbey, our usual group is sitting together taking turns arguing with Marcus, who is already working on his tenth White Russian and is on the verge of belligerence.

"Marcus, what you need to do is start off with a simple job, make enough money to get back on your feet, and go from there. That's

what I'm doing right now," explains Eve.

"No, no, no, no. There is no job to be had for the black man in New Orleans. The whole system is fucked up. Look around, the only jobs that black men have in this city are janitors and parking lot attendants. And neither one of those is cut out for me."

"With all the bars in this town, why don't you apply as a doorman or a bartender? That's easy money. You get paid for checking ID's or making drinks."

"The only drink Marcus can make is a White Russian and he'd insist on taking a sip out of each one he makes just to make sure it tastes all right," laughs T. S.

"Fuck you, Thomas. I don't see you raking in anything except what you can beg from your relatives. None of y'all understand because you're white. A black man has heritage and pride, and I ain't lowerin' myself to do some shit job."

"That's T. S., Marcus, and I'll have you know that a *writer* is too *alone* to be proud."

Eve laughs hysterically.

"Thomas, you're the least alone person I know. If you can't find somebody to listen to you, you'll go give a bum a quarter just so you can have an ear to talk into. And I've noticed that you have a little bit of pride, too."

Marcus finishes off his tenth White Russian and looks at me.

"Hey, Blake, you've been quiet tonight. Hell, you're always quiet. I want to hear your opinion. What do you know about pride?"

Eve reaches over and pats me on the top of the head.

"Leave Blake alone. He can be quiet if he wants; he's the boy next door."

"No, really. What do you know about pride, Blake?"

I stop staring at my Beck's and look at each of their faces, confused and afraid that my voice might crack.

I lower my eyes back to the table before answering:

"It goes before a fall."

Two nights later (though I can't be absolutely sure, since my recent sleeping habits have my internal clock screwed up), I'm sitting on the foot of Eve's bed, wearing jeans and no shirt, pulling on my socks.

The sex was short-lived but intense. Eve is so insatiable in bed that she was ready to do it again after about ten minutes and she has such a nice body and the sex was so damn *good* that I said, "Why not?" and it wasn't as good this time but rougher and longer; in the end, she was lying on her side of the bed, smoking, and I was staring at the ceiling, wondering how I got up here and, more importantly, how I can get out.

Looking around for my shoes, I ask, "Why did you start smoking?"

"I've always smoked; you just never noticed."

I'm at a loss for an answer so I say nothing, still trying to find my

fucking shoes.

"What have you been doing, Blake?"

"What have *you* been doing?"

"You know what I do; I work or hang out with you at The Abbey or walk around the Quarter. You don't work; you hardly ever come to The Abbey anymore; what do you do?"

I know that I must do *something*, but I can't think of an adequate answer right now; my head hurts, I'm strung out, I don't get enough exercise, what *do* I do?

"Talk to me, Blake. Tell me what you do."

"I guess I do what everybody else does."

I stand up, shoes intact on my feet, shirt on but unbuttoned.

"I'm leaving."

"Will you stay and talk to me?"

"No."

I walk toward the door of Eve's bedroom.

"Blake..."

I stop in the doorway.

"...I get the feeling that you never get to hear this...so I just wanted to tell you that...I love you," she says, confused, sounding unsure of herself; it comes out as a question rather than a statement.

I walk down the hallway of her apartment; for some reason, the words to a Dylan song I heard the night before flash through my head: "*I've known a lot of women, but she never escaped my mind...*" and I'm thinking, "Not Eve, surely it's not Eve who can't escape my mind."

I'm opening the door to the apartment and she says, "Blake..." and I stop, but don't turn around.

"Yes?"

She hesitates before answering softly:

"Never mind."

The Square is crowded today, almost as many tourists and amateur entertainers as pigeons; in any case, there are too many of both, and I'm having to concentrate on where I walk because my mind is somewhere else. I keep bumping into these stupid mimes, and their cardboard boxes are empty because, hey, how entertaining is it to stand still? It's not like standing still isn't a skill everybody is born with.

I'm shuffling around, not thinking about anything in particular but thinking about everything under the sun and I find myself in front of St. Louis Cathedral. I'm wondering how I ended up here, in front of this church, because I'm not Catholic, and I don't even know when the last time I set foot in *any* church was. But I feel drawn to this place and now I'm walking up the steps toward the door of the Cathedral, trying to convince myself I don't need to go in, but unable to stop. I'm standing on the top step looking up at the steeples jutting into the sky, wondering if this is some kind of perverse phallic symbolism. While I'm looking up at the spires, an Oriental man

pushes me roughly in the back and holds a camera up to his face and I realize that I've wandered into a family picture; I mumble my apologies and walk back down the steps and away from the church.

With the Cathedral safely behind me, I decide that I need to see Ben; not necessarily talk to him, but just see him and his work, as if his very presence can comfort me.

Walking towards Ben's usual spot, I feel the late November wind biting through my flannel shirt, stinging my face and ears, and making my eyes water. It's pushed across the river by some unseen hand and howls around the Square, scattering leaves and sheet music from a jazz band of fourteen-year-olds, causing a simultaneous shiver to run through all of the people around.

Evidently, Ben stepped away from his chair and easel for a minute, probably to get out of the wind. Some of his paintings are lying on the ground, victims of the ferocious wind, so I pick them up and stack them in the empty chair. Depressed now, even though simply seeing the paintings was a small relief, I turn to go. As I'm walking away, a bright light catches my eye and I turn to see the vase of roses still sitting on the table by the easel. The sun glints off the cheap glass vase and I see that the roses in the vase are the same ones that I saw before; now, though, the roses are black and dead, their petals brittle and dry and crumbling as the winds whip around the Square.

I'm walking down Bourbon now, hands in my pockets, head down, trying to decide what I need to do and what I want to do. The easiest course of action seems to be to leave; pack my bags and leave without a second thought. I'd done it before and I can do it forever. But I'm struck by the notion that I'm running away from something and I can't quite put my finger on what it is that I'm so scared to face. Is it my mother's death, or some responsibility I have to make her proud? Or am I running from myself?

Not really knowing how I ended up on Bourbon of all places, I quicken my pace and work feverishly to resolve the dilemma presented in my head. Not paying attention, I walk square into some guy and almost make him fall off the curb. I stop to apologize and make sure he's all right and I'm looking at him and I could swear he looks familiar but I can't quite place him so I turn and keep walking.

"Hey, Blake —"

I turn around and look at this guy; he's about my age, dressed a lot like me, but his eyes are out to lunch and this makes me wonder if he thinks *my* eyes are out to lunch.

"Blake, it's Ross, from Chapel Hill. What's happenin', buddy?"

"Holy shit, Ross, I didn't even recognize you, man. What are you doin' here?"

"You know how it is; a dead weekend in Chapel Hill and nobody was playin' anywhere so I came down to see some girls I graduated from high school with. How long have you been here?"

"Not long, really. A few months. I'm not too sure."

"Well, hey, let's go in Big Daddy's and check out the chicks in there. I'm supposed to be pickin' up some blow for the girls I'm stayin' with, but the guy I'm gettin' it from isn't home. It's fuckin' brutal out here; I've got to get out of this wind."

"Are you sure you want to go in Big Daddy's? It's probably the roughest strip bar down here."

"Yeah, man, come on in and have a few drinks with your buddy. I'll tell you about this party tonight I'm goin' to with those girls I know. A couple of these girls are fine, and this blow is supposed to be the best in the city, if I can get in touch with this guy."

We walk towards Big Daddy's, but I catch a glimpse of the inside and stop.

"Hey, Ross, can't we go somewhere else? There's nobody in this place except old perverts and fat dancers."

"Come on, let's go."

"Man, this bar really isn't for people like us; look, it's completely empty."

"That doesn't matter."

"What does?"

"Just that we're in it."

I'm on another bus heading east on I-10. We're right outside the city limits of New Orleans and I'm happy to be leaving but still unsure of where I'm going. I'm bored so I'm looking out the window at the signs on the side of the interstate being blown back and forth by the wind. I see signs for rest areas ahead, construction, distances to upcoming cities. I think about the people who make these signs and who decides what goes on them. If I could make a sign, I'd have one placed in every delivery room of every hospital in the world. My sign would be the first thing that every baby born would see. It would read: "Welcome to Life. No Place for the Innocent."

EMBROIDERED HISTORY

Elaine Posanka

The tour guide smooths calico
pleats with her flat palm tugs
at knotted ivory lace wrists and
waits while children assemble

at the foot of her cane rocking chair.
Her palm moves to check pulled-back
hair and I know I have followed
this woman through other field trip sites

Tara Sturbridge Village Plymouth Plantation.
Followed her tight bun in its
crocheted net that allows only well-
planned tendrils escape.

I know the swishing sound of her slippers
down swollen hardwood floors her skirts
brush past carved banisters or fingernails run
along stitches in featherbed quilts.

Her voice, smooth as the motion of her hands,
even as careful basting, recites memorized stories
to school children and tourists alike.
Tales I have heard before, and I ignore them.

The group moves on to the next room the next
anecdote. Left behind, I study quilt fragments
hem of an infant's christening gown, apron ties,
head scarves, and husband's handkerchiefs.

fact fiction the words jab
at me, sharp as crochet hooks. My fingers
follow seams read the Braille of stitched texts,
the unprinted lessons of women and history.

BOOBY JENKINS

Russ Connell

“wankawankawankawankawanka”

You could hear Booby Jenkins when he moved.

He made arcade noises
every time he moved.

A boy trapped
inside Donkey Kong
then Q-Bert or Pac
Man.

He'd run from his desk
“bloopbloopbloopbloopbloop”
with short quick
steps “bloopbloopbloopbloop”
to the pencil
sharpener.

With sharp point pointing
like a blade
he'd hop back

“bown bown bown”
 bown bown and sit

“boodedeedoo.”

He never spoke —
at least
I never heard
him.

STONEY

Kevin Ray

"Stoney knew better than to rock that Coke machine," Mister Cantrell said, and spit an exclamation point of Red Man juice into the oil stains at his feet.

"He knew that old wood pallet was rotten."

"Doc Lampley said it was a heart attack that killed him, not my Coke machine," Buddy Wilson said.

"Still, it's funny it landed on Stoney. He had the strongest arm to ever come out of Jefferson High School," Mister Franklin put in.

"There's a lot worse people in Cold Springs than Stoney Jackson that that thing could've fell on," Mister Rainey said, and all the men nodded in agreement.

"Lots worse people by far."

It was a year ago yesterday that my father died, and just about the same time of day, straight up noon and hot as an iron, when I went down to Buddy's Stop 'N Fill again for probably the thirtieth time since he died. The same old men were sitting around in Buddy's cane-back chairs, carrying on the endless, circular conversation that eventually came around to everything and everybody in Cold Springs except the one subject I wanted to hear. They moved from one end of town to the other, rambling through neighborhoods and decades, cutting across backyards and family ties, their words carrying them places their feet no longer could. Nobody in Cold Springs escaped the old-man gathering at Buddy's Stop 'N Fill, just like nobody escaped the prayer circle of Miss Louise's Bible study group. But the members of Miss Louise's were an exclusive bunch, no men allowed and especially not a thirteen-year-old. So I'd had to keep content with staking out the Stop 'N Fill on and off for the last year. And yesterday, just when I was about to give up and leave, they finally talked about it. August seventeenth had become a day on the calendar, here, just about as big as Lee's birthday. I guess it's a good thing it happened in the dead of August when there was nothing going on but the heat, or some bigger holiday might have skated over it.

Their scratchy voices mumbled over the oil spills and sawdust, their words finally came to me there, where I was hiding in the shadow of the live oak, those words from a year ago that I haven't been able to get out of my head. Why would Stoney rock that Coke machine if he knew that old wood pallet was broken; more importantly, why would he go down to Buddy's Stop 'N Fill for a Coke when we had plenty in the refrigerator at home that day? I know that much; it was one of the first things I checked when Buddy called and told us what had happened.

I had been waiting for that day for a whole year. August seventeenth had hung there, in front of me, quieter than Christmas and sadder than Easter. The day Stoney died I'd played over and over in my head: I'd looked at it from every angle, approached it from every direction and still couldn't make any more sense of it than I could then. That's why I thought maybe yesterday would be different, maybe some

new trigger that would set off something, anything that could say what happened and if, or why, Stoney killed himself.

When Stoney told me that morning, the seventeenth, that we were going to fix the gas tank on his old Chevy, I thought he was joking. He and my younger brother, Jeremy, were the ones who usually fiddled with cars. There was no way in hell, I thought, that I was going to get under that old truck in that heat and fix a leaky gas tank. I tried every way I could think of to get out of it, but Stoney thought it was time for me to learn the basics and the basics to Stoney were to be able to fix your own truck when something went wrong, even if you weren't old enough to drive one yet.

It must've been about ten o'clock that Saturday morning when we went down to the Auto Zone. The store was queer and, at the same time, fascinating to me: the oily smell of new parts, the neatly-arranged aisles of bent metal and steel rings, the rows of windshield wiper replacement blades. I followed Stoney around the store, trying to hide my interest as well as the fact that I didn't know what we were looking for; I was a little embarrassed at being found out. I guess I was trying to be the kind of son he needed, without really knowing what to do. And I remember noticing how Stoney seemed to get stronger the further away from Mama he got. He inspected the aisles like a seeing-eye dog. He knew what he wanted and where to find it. I kept close to him and he explained what we were looking for and what we were going to do with it. He seemed, I don't know, fatherly — something he usually wasn't. At least not with me.

We were in the backyard all that morning. I was under the truck, trying to replace the leaky sock inside the tank. Stoney was sitting in the grass beside me next to the back left tire, telling me what to do and handing me the wrench and sock. I had sweat and dirt and oil and what I was afraid was gasoline all over my hands and face. At the time I thought it was the worst thing he had ever made me do. But after I'd been under there for a half an hour I got this sense of satisfaction, a skillful confidence, a feeling of what it was like to be a man — or at least the kind of man Stoney was — to get dirty and sweaty and fix something with your hands. Which is the lesson I guess he was trying to teach me; I was twelve years old.

What I can't figure out was why he went down to Buddy's. That's what I've been trying to understand this past year. It's what I've thought about at the strangest times. Like when I was supposed to be paying attention to the pop flies in P. E., I thought about Stoney in the Auto Zone. When I should've been reading *Lord of the Flies* for Mrs. Thompson's class, I would think about that Coke machine. When I walked my little sister, Clarkson, home from kindergarten, I would think about that day in the backyard, under the truck, and how maybe it wouldn't have hurt me any to spend more time with Stoney. I got all my work done; I even did better in school this past year. It's funny that with all those distractions in my mind I didn't go further toward the edge of craziness, instead of away from it. Whenever one of those thoughts would come up, I would end up playing back the whole morning in my

head, like a video you've seen a thousand times and know every inch of so no matter where you start it up again, you're never lost in the story. And I think that was what kept me sane; it let me think about something other than myself.

I kept playing back that morning, going from the breakfast table to the Auto Zone to the time under the truck to the time Stoney left for Buddy's, looking for anything that would stick out. And that's where I'd run into trouble, because I was too used to overlooking the strange things in my family — the details that I knew would stand out to anybody else, looking in.

That morning, while Stoney and I were under the truck, Mama came out of the house wearing her going-to-see-Ranson look. I knew Ranson was in town because I saw him the day before at the mall.

Mama had dated Ranson a long time ago when they were both at Jefferson High School. Ranson went away to college in Europe and Mama married Jeremiah Stonewall Jackson — known to everybody in town as Stoney — the only son of one of the oldest but most destitute families in Cold Springs. Some things mean more than money, and to Mama, the Jackson name was as good as gold. Besides, she didn't need to worry about money; her father had made sure of that. I was named after Stoney's grandfather, who sat on the Alabama Supreme Court, the great Judge Roy Boutwell Jackson; everybody calls me Judge.

"I'm going to get a bite to eat," Mama said as she got into her car. "I'll see you boys later."

"All right, Lucy, be careful," Stoney said.

It wasn't a big deal, because we were all used to Ranson calling on Mama, or at least used to overlooking it. He was like an uncle, and I'd stopped thinking about what he might seem like to Stoney. But that day, after Mama took off, Stoney lay his head back and turned his craggy brown face to the sky. There weren't any clouds or birds, not even a spear of shade. Looking at the sky and without looking back at me, he said, "I'm going down to Buddy's, Judge. You be sure to clean up this mess before your mama gets back." Those were the last words he said to me. Clean up this mess before your mama gets back.

Mama said Stoney couldn't express himself. She'd say he couldn't communicate. She never had that problem, at least not back then. I heard her refer to him as a puppy dog once. She was talking on the phone to Aunt Evie and she said she wished he'd take charge every once in a while and not be such a damned puppy dog. She treated him like a kid most of the time. They never really fought. What Stoney called a fight was Mama yelling at him, literally, to do something. "Do something," she'd say. "Get out of this house. Get out of my hair. Why can't you play golf or go fishing or do anything but stay in this house and under my feet?" I wished sometimes that there would be a fight. At least then, I thought, she might have respected him.

That morning, that's what I was thinking about, how I wished Mama would respect him more. I guess I could have, too. I didn't spend too much time around our house back then, either. That morning Stoney and I had come the closest to being a picture of father and son

we had ever been. That's why it was so strange for me, him leaving me there beside the truck when he went down to Buddy's. He'd set his mind to spend time with me, to make a man of me, then he up and left, for good. Although I'd been taking off ever since I could remember.

Cold Springs is a decent-sized town for a kid to grow up in, not too big to get you into any serious trouble but not too little to bore you to death. Downtown has more than twelve intersections and five red lights and a Wendy's; it's bigger than Atkins, which is up the road. The best thing about Cold Springs is that it's small enough to patrol by bicycle, which is what I did the years before Stoney died; I haven't been doing it as much lately. But back then I would ride down to the rec center after school, and play ping pong or foos ball with whoever was there. Sometimes I rode downtown and hung out in Woolworth's. They have a tropical fish section — mostly goldfish — and every once in a while they would get in a couple of hamsters. And sometimes I would ride over to First Baptist Church, where I'd been baptized four years earlier, making me feel like I kind of owned a little part of it, or at least the privilege of sneaking in. The church was a big brick sanctuary, painted white, connected to two white brick buildings used for Sunday school and kindergarten and Brother Bob's office. It was easily the biggest building in Cold Springs, even bigger than the courthouse. Stoney called it Fort Jesus; I called it refuge. Before Stoney died it was one of the main places I hung out in. I guess I could have read or done my homework, but back then I didn't think like that. I wandered and explored and kept to myself. I would let myself in the side door of the fellowship and dining room and roam the silent halls. I pretended it was my house. I imagined it was my family's medieval castle and I was in there alone. I'd climb the ladder up inside the steeple and sit for hours looking through the round window, watching Cold Springs carry on below me. The kids playing on the Confederate statue next door to the sanctuary never knew I could see their every move. The people going in and out of First Alabama Bank across the street had no idea I was watching them. There was a rare, white, horned owl once on the ledge beneath the window; after the newspaper ran a front-page story on it, about fifty people came to see the rare bird on the steeple. A couple people brought binoculars and passed them around for the others to get a better look. Clarence Holley brought his automatic rifle. They say the thing flew away. It must have sensed all those people down below. I wouldn't know; I stayed far away.

So I wasn't around the house much, and even when I was I didn't see much of Stoney. He spent most of his time with Jeremy, or, when he wasn't fussing over Mama, out in his shed behind the garage, fiddling with his collection of junk. He packed that shed chock full of old clocks and telephones that he'd rescued from flea markets and pawn shops all over Lee County. They covered the walls of his shed, all mixed in together, row after row, clear up to the ceiling. I asked him once why he collected old broken telephones and clocks. He said because those were the things that changed so fast; technology was always improving and making the old ones outdated and out of style. Stoney didn't like

technology, he said; he liked soundness, sturdiness, the dependability of old things. Stoney liked the familiar. I didn't quite understand that, because I liked push-button telephones, clock radios. The old stuff meant old-fashioned, and old-fashioned reminded me of the old men down at Buddy's; I never wanted to be like that. I wanted to get out of this place one day, go to college away somewhere like Ranson did, only I wouldn't keep coming back the way he does. I wanted to be a judge, like my grandfather, not whittle myself away in a gossip session down at the Stop 'N Fill.

But one month before Stoney died, on the fourth of July, his need for the familiar took us down to Destin for a long weekend. Destin is the place his family spent most of their holidays and family gatherings when Stoney was growing up; it was where he learned to swim. Destin was the closest beach to Cold Springs, after Gulf Shores, and I guess other people besides Stoney liked to see familiar faces on vacation, because there were at least seven or eight families from Cold Springs down there. You'd think they'd want to get away and not see anybody from home. I know that's what I thought I wanted.

We drove down Interstate 65 that hot July day, and Stoney was running through the radio stations. He stopped on the old songs he knew and sang so loud and sure of himself that it didn't matter when he got off key or flubbed the words, because he made it seem like that was the way they should've been sung. He was in charge, and I remember thinking how he must have been back then, in the glory days of high school football, when he was the Friday night star and the Sunday morning gospel, instead of a middle-aged house husband holding onto his fading touchdowns. But his spirits were up that day. He was whistling and humming, chewing gum, and winking at us every time he said something.

He'd arranged for us to stay at his cousin Martin's beach house at Seaside. It was a big white wooden house, new but not modern, with grey trim and shutters, plenty of windows and a deck on the back, facing the gulf, that stretched from one end of the house to the other. The house seemed only to want to fit in with the other, older houses beside it, unlike the glaring new Hilton up the beach which Stoney said was an eyesore.

He herded us into the house, throwing up shades and opening windows — he hated air-conditioning — showing us the house and each of us our rooms. My little sister, Clarkson, and Jeremy ran up and down the stairs, peeking into every room and cabinet. Stoney looked at Mama, trying to read her face for any sign that she might be impressed. But she stood in the doorway of the main bedroom, her back to us, looking toward the sliding glass door opening to the deck. The waves stretching out in front of her didn't seem to affect the words that came out of her mouth. She said we'd have been better off at the Hilton, where at least there was room service. I imagined that if a man could crumple, suck in his face and body, that would've been how Stoney looked. Or at least how I wanted him to look. I wanted him to have some reaction other than the one he did; he smiled and said he'd deliver her room

service. Then he went up behind her and tried to kiss her on the cheek. I turned and walked down the stairs and out to the beach. I didn't want to see her turn her face away.

I don't know how long I sat there, maybe an hour. The wind was blowing hard, whipping my hair into my eyes, but I didn't want to go back in to get my hat. I knew what was going on in there: Mama was brooding, and Stoney was trying to get her out of it; he was probably fixing her a drink. I sat on the beach, the mud-colored sun setting in front of me, nearly touching the green water, and the wind was pushing sand across my feet like smoke. Sand crabs poked their heads out of holes and scooted from one to another. I heard my name called from the right, from the direction of the wind and sand, and the sand crabs disappeared.

"Judge. Judge Jackson. What the hell are you doing down here?"

It was Kyle Brannon. He was a friend of mine from last year, the year before junior high, who now I didn't hang out with much outside of First Baptist. I guess I hadn't made much of an effort. Mama once said he came from the wrong side of town; his family was too new. But he was a football star now, and maybe I was jealous. It's one thing I wanted to be just about more than anything. Stoney never pushed me, but I figured it was only natural for him to want his oldest son to pick up where he had left off. There was always a football around the house or in the yard. Stoney would throw it to me as I came into the yard, and we would toss it around, but our hearts weren't in it. I was going to go out last year, for the junior high team. But I didn't grow enough over the summer; plus, I never really tried.

I'd heard Kyle's family were coming down, but he didn't seem to know we would be. Kyle played quarterback for the Bullpups — the varsity were the Bulldogs — and although he wasn't big and mean, he was tough and scrappy and he'd already made a name for himself among the eighth graders, not to mention the men down at Buddy's. Our parents spoke to each other at church functions: services, and picnics, and ice-cream suppers, but hardly ever outside of that.

"How's it going?" I asked, getting to my feet. I didn't know what to say to him. If we were at church I could say something about the crazy hats on the old ladies up front, or if we were at school, a casual "what's up" would do as we passed in the hall. But there on that beach with no one else around, just the two of us, I wished he would walk on away. I wanted to sit there without having to worry about looking lonely.

Before I could think of anything to say, before my fumbling could turn into awkwardness, over Kyle's shoulder I saw Stoney through the glass door and Mama behind him. Stoney pulled the door open and waited for Mama to step out onto the deck. I wanted to turn around, grab Kyle by the sleeve, and head off up the beach, but I didn't have that fearlessness; I didn't know how he'd react. Besides, he had turned around and was staring at the vision on the deck. Mama had changed into a white silk outfit with a matching long white robe. Her blonde hair was piled on top of her head, queen-like; the wind caught goldish threads that had blown free and made them fidget around her face. She was smiling at Stoney, swaying from side to side, then resting her head

on his shoulder. I saw the highball glass in her hand; Stoney had fixed her a drink. Kyle's eyes seemed stuck, glassy, smiling. I followed his gaze. I looked back at the deck, at Mama standing next to Stoney, her robe almost wrapping completely around him; the two of them looked like one big silk cocoon. They seemed content, and almost lucky to have each other. That's what I imagine Kyle saw, and I thought maybe for a minute I saw it, too. But of course, I couldn't have; I knew it wasn't the way my mother felt.

"Hello, Mrs. Jackson. Hey, Stoney," Kyle yelled. Everybody in Cold Springs called Stoney by his first name. He had been such a famous quarterback that even the kids my age, twenty years later, still knew of his herculean arm, especially Kyle, because folks were starting to compare Kyle to him.

Stoney yelled across the sand. "How's that arm?" I don't think he wanted an answer, just an audience. He squeezed Mama closer to him. "Tell your folks to stop over tonight."

"Yes, sir," Kyle shouted back above the wind and surf.

Mama smiled. She waved and turned and drifted back though the door. For once, she seemed to enjoy letting Stoney do the talking, even if it was only to Kyle, a seventh grader. I wondered if she saw a glimpse of what she thought her life could be like, if she'd been able to keep this up — the way she was being now with Kyle — or if she was just drunk.

As Kyle and I stood there on the beach, it was as if the vision of their marriage hung there, suspended, and then came off the deck and surrounded us. It was as if, because we had been caught up in their cocoon, all the uncomfortableness of the silence before was gone. I was as calm as if I'd swigged on that highball. I don't know why, but I could talk to Kyle now; I even made him laugh. It was like I'd been changed by what he saw, even though I didn't believe in it myself.

Kyle and I zigzagged in and out of the surf, bare-footed, dodging the water as a sheet of foam slid up and down the sand, leaving a glassy plate before evaporating.

"Your folks are cool, Judge," he said. "I wish I had your parents."

"Yeah, right," I said, stopping and letting the water wash over my feet. Kyle splashed me, spraying me in the face with the chill of the shallow water.

"Oh, man, you're in for it," I yelled. He ran out to where the water reached his knees. I followed him. It was cold and the bottoms of my shorts soaked up the salty water. I pushed harder through the water because my wet shorts slowed me down. I charged toward him and tackled him, my arms around his waist, picking him up out of the water before I tripped, pulling us both into the cold water. We surfaced, shaking water from our hair and eyes, and Kyle looked at me, surprised.

"Damn, Judge, where did that come from?"

I was surprised, too. It's not something I usually did. I'm not really into that sort of thing. I learned a long time ago not to wrestle with bigger kids; it was humiliating to lose. But those thoughts didn't bother me then. I felt like it was the right thing to do. I guess I was trying to prove something.

"Man, this water's cold," he said, spitting water in my face.

"It's not cold," I said. I dunked him under.

Knowing someone thought I had something worth envying — a beautiful mother, a father who had been a good athlete, both of them seeming happy, and in love — had turned something on inside of me. I suppose that's where the sudden faith or confidence or muscle came from. Whatever it was, I liked it. Up until that minute, I never understood what a regular family felt like. There, seeing what Kyle saw, I realized what Stoney had wanted, had tried to be. I wanted it, too, then. Maybe I realized that right then for the first time. But a smarter part of me, or a more honest part, knew that it would never work: Kyle and I were looking at two different things.

The Coke machine was on a cement platform now. It was the same machine, except that the scratched, front red panels had been replaced. The sun moved over to one o'clock, edging my shadow with light; the men saw me. They nodded and smiled, pitying smiles which I ignored. I grinned back, because I was raised to be polite. I stepped out of the shadow and jumped on my bike to head toward home, not directly, but through the park, because I wasn't in a hurry to get home. Mama was there. She spent a lot of time in her room alone. Ranson came over every time he was in town, but he didn't stay long, because Mama would say she wasn't fit for company.

In the field across from the monkey cage I spotted Kyle in the middle of a ball of tumbling guys, scattering leaves that had fallen too soon. They were playing tag football. Kyle yelled my name and waved me over; he'd been pretty friendly this past year and I didn't think it was all sympathy. I would've ridden over and joined in, but something else called my name. I rode across the lawn of Mason Elementary, and out onto Eighth Street. The old cemetery was only two blocks up the road. No one got buried there anymore, except Stoney, because that's where his family was — his real family, I thought now, which wasn't us. It never had been.

STORMS

Elisabeth Snell

My mother called for me when she heard the first rumble of thunder in the distance. She knew I would be at the desk in my bedroom. From my window I liked to watch spring lightning storms come in across the long, flat acres of South Georgia peanut fields. When the lightening strikes, I count the seconds before I hear the thunder; that way I can tell how far away the storm is and how soon it will reach my window. This was the first storm I had watched come toward the graveyard beside our house since my grandmother was buried there two weeks ago. Her gravestone had just been put up and I wondered if lightning ever hit gravemarkers. That was what I was thinking when I heard my mother's voice, calling for me.

From the window in my bedroom, the cemetery is between my house and the small, white Methodist church where my mother has taken me for Sunday services since I was born twelve years ago. The road in front of my house is to my left and there are woods on the right that stretched behind the house, the graveyard, and then the church. The graveyard is not very big but it is longer than it is wide. About the time I get home from school, the dark shadow that runs along the edge of the trees begins to spread across the graveyard, to my window, and then to the road. By then, it is night.

My mother calls for me a lot now that my grandmother is dead. My grandmother was her mother. I had been named Maddie after her, and she, after her father Madison. I wondered if it made Mama sad to have to say her mother's name every time she called me. I wondered if sometimes when she called me, she really wanted to call her mother. Before Grandmother died, my mother was always asking me to help out, to bring tea or another quilt. Sometimes she wanted me to read the Bible to her. Grandmother couldn't drink the tea without help, and she didn't act like she understood what I was reading to her. I don't even think she could feel if she was cold. But Mama asked me to do these things, so I did.

It had been just the three of us since I was four and my father left us. "A house of women" my mother called it. She always said that was part of why my father left. Now that Grandmother was dead, it was only the two of us living in the house; but I felt like I was alone there even though my mother wanted me to be with her more than before. "I've lost my mother" was what my mama said when she cried and hugged me too tight. But I didn't think of Grandmother's death the way Mama did. I didn't think of Grandmother as being lost. All my life my bedroom window had faced a cemetery; dead people were always with me. The only time people were really gone is when they left you completely like my father did. The only thing I remember about him is his kissing me at bedtime on the night he left.

I spend more time with my best friend Sarah, now. She has lived in Blythe for two years and I was the first girl she met. She said that she had dreamed before she moved here that the first girl she met would be her best friend and the first boy would be the one she'd marry. She said it was destiny.

The first boy she met was Tom Banks, who lived next door to the school and whose father was the meat man at the grocery store. Sarah said it was romantic how she had dreamed about meeting him. She had only talked to Tom once but she said that it didn't matter; they couldn't get married, anyway, until she went to college. I was not as sure about fate and boys as Sarah was. When I made up stories about the people whose gravestones were in the graveyard, I felt like fate was something I controlled. And boys, well, I hadn't been around them very much and I was scared they would never be interested in me. I couldn't be sure that if I picked out a boy, like Sarah had picked Tom, that he would want to marry me after college. But still, I liked Sarah; she wasn't like the other girls at school who talked every Monday in the cafeteria about who had snuck out into a field or behind a barn to make out on Friday or Saturday night. Sarah and I sat at a different table from those girls, but we could always overhear their loud boasts and embarrassed giggles.

I had never kissed a boy except my father and Sarah said that didn't count unless he deserved to be in jail. Sarah had kissed two boys when she lived in Atlanta. One was her baby sitter's brother who was three years older than she was. She said he had been the one to teach her how to French kiss which was something I hadn't heard of until then. I asked Sarah if she would teach me and so she kissed me once behind the church. Then she made me pinky swear on one of the graves that I wouldn't tell and she said if I did, that person whose grave we were standing on would come to haunt me. I didn't think Maybelle Celeste Pritchett, who died in 1927, really cared that we had kissed or if I told. I had pretended she was someone's aunt that never married and baked fresh cookies for the kids after school. But now with Sarah I had realized that my story was made up and that I didn't know who Maybelle Celeste Pritchett really was. I began to be afraid of the ghost just a little. After the kiss is when I first thought of Sarah as my best friend. Sarah had said kissing made girls feel closer to their boyfriends, but I was pretty sure I didn't feel closer to her in that way. I felt close to her because we had a real secret.

Outside now the storm was reaching my yard. I liked how I could see the places where it wasn't raining yet and the places where it was. The whole sky was gray now and where the sun had made shadows from the gravemarkers, the gravel stones were dark from being wet. In just a few minutes my whole house would be covered by the storm.

My mother worked for Mr. Shuford, the veterinarian in town. She used to work until dark before Grandmother died. Then when I came home from school I could check on Grandmother and have the rest of the afternoon to do whatever I wanted. Now, she was at home every afternoon before I got there. "Doesn't Mr. Shuford have any animals for you to see?" I asked her. I wanted her to know that she didn't have to be at home waiting for me. I didn't want her to know that it was easier for me to leave and play with Sarah if I didn't know she was at home, crying at the kitchen table.

She didn't understand why I didn't want to be with her. It wasn't that I didn't want to be around my mother, not completely. I just didn't like the way she wanted it to be. She wanted to talk but I was afraid of saying the wrong things that might make her start crying so I waited until she asked me

questions. She would ask me about my teacher at school and about Sarah's parents and about the sandwiches I had been packing for lunch. And I would make up stories for her like I did about the people in the graveyard. Before Grandmother died, after she got really sick, Mama started asking her about stories of when she was a little girl. I was afraid of asking those questions because I didn't want to remind Mama of her dead mother.

When the lightning storm began and Mama called me, I went downstairs like I knew I should. She was in the parlor and I went and sat next to her on the loveseat that had once been in her mother's parlor. She handed me a coke can that was more than half empty from the drink she had poured for herself. I took it because it was easier than telling her I wasn't thirsty. I waited for her question. "This storm came in pretty fast, didn't it?" she asked. "Yes Ma'am. They travel faster the closer it gets to summer." It didn't matter that this wasn't true; it was something to say to a question that really didn't need an answer. I swallowed the last, flat sip in the coke can and came back up to my bedroom to watch the storm.

My mama is calling for me again, now. I can hear her voice below me and I know she has moved to the kitchen. I will go to her. But this time, instead of staying downstairs, I will take my mama's hand and bring her up to my bedroom with me. "Let's not talk, Mama," I will say to her. "Let's just watch the rain."

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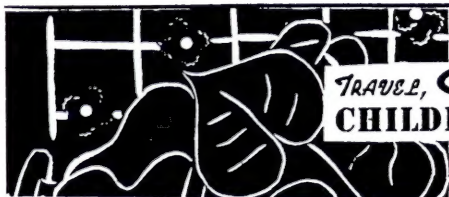
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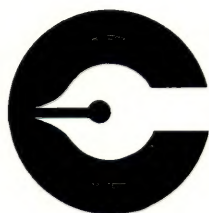
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